



WONDER HERO

9226

*ALSO BY J. B. PRIESTLEY*

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THE GOOD COMPANIONS  
ANGEL PAVEMENT  
THE TOWN MAJOR OF MIRACOURT  
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I'LL TELL YOU EVERYTHING (WITH GERALD FULLER)

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PEACOCK (ENGLISH MEN OF LETTERS)  
THE ENGLISH NOVEL  
HUMOUR (ENGLISH HERITAGE SERIES)

J. B. PRIESTLEY

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W O N D E R  
H E R O



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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

THE world whose antics are satirised in certain chapters of this novel is a very small one, but that does not mean there is no room for invention in it or that I have attacked, under the cover of fictitious names, actual persons, establishments, institutions. Any reader who persists in thinking that actual persons, establishments, institutions can be discovered here will be wilfully misreading my text and misunderstanding my intention.

J. B. P.



## CHAPTER ONE

### CHARLIE HABBLE'S DAY

#### 1

IT was a Tuesday in early spring, about the time when the *Daily Tribune* announced that it had a certified daily net sale of more than one and a half million copies. One of those copies, neatly folded, still a virgin sheet, was waiting for its own registered reader: Charles Habble, care of Mrs. Fawset, 12, Duck Street, Utterton. That young man was working at night this week, and so had been asleep all morning. But now his dinner was ready, and Mrs. Fawset called up the stairs to tell him so. She had just placed on the table some fried liver and potatoes, a pot of strong tea, bread and buttered tea-cake, some tinned apricots in a glass dish and a little jug of rather lumpy custard. Before the liver had time to stop winking and sizzling, Charlie Habble was downstairs and digging a fork into it. This was to be the very last dinner he would ever eat at Mrs. Fawset's, the last dinner he would ever eat as Charlie Habble who had never been anybody in particular; but he did not know this and neither did Mrs. Fawset. Even the *Daily Tribune* only knew Charlie yet as an insignificant unit in an army of registered readers, a mere name on a coupon, a penny in Utterton.

There is somebody like Charlie Habble—though perhaps a little younger—in nearly every football team, especially north of the Trent: the very muddy one, probably known as "Ginger." A sturdy fellow, about five foot eight, in his late twenties. He has short sandy hair and rather long sandy eyelashes, the fair skin and freckles and sea-green eyes of his kind, a perky nose of some size, and the mouth of a decent boy who is still not sure of himself and a bit sulky. This morning he had washed very thoroughly, but had not troubled to shave, and he was wearing his second-best suit, a blue serge, but had not yet put on a collar and tie. So there you have him: a good figure of a Nordic male; a sound specimen of Britain's industrial population; a registered reader of the *Daily Tribune*.

After helping himself to liver and potatoes, Charlie noticed the letter, which for a moment he eyed warily, as if it might explode. He had the same attitude towards letters that elderly middle-class people, all safe and snug, have towards telegrams, those bolts from the regions of catastrophe. Letters were infrequent in his world and not very welcome because more often than not they contained bad news. He examined the envelope. The postmark announced that it came from his native town, Bendworth. He concluded that it must be from his married sister, Ada; though he did not recognise the handwriting because it did not occur to him that handwriting was something that could be recognised. Before opening the letter, he poured out a cup of tea, added plenty of milk and sugar, and took a good gulp of the thick sweet mixture.

Then, refreshed, he dealt with Ada, who began by declaring that they were all right and hoping he was the same. She then went on to tell him that Daisy Halstead had gone and married that George Fletcher after all, and it was last Saturday, and they had had a big car with white ribbons tied on it, and there was a little piece about it in the paper, and she hoped Charlie didn't mind, but she felt she ought to tell him. It would be helpful to record that at this point Charlie pushed away his liver and potatoes, apricots and tea, and buried his face in his hands. But he did nothing of the kind. He ate and drank heartily, though once or twice he picked up the letter and frowned at it.

Mrs. Fawset appeared in the doorway. "Did you get your letter?"

"Yes," he mumbled, his mouth full.

This was no use to Mrs. Fawset, who liked to have something to think about when she was in her kitchen. "That's right," she said encouragingly; and then, to gain time. "I thought it was for me when it first came, because I'm expecting one from my brother, but then when I had another look at it I saw it was for you, and I said to myself: 'Well, I expect it's from his young lady.' You know, the one that came to see you here that time, from where-is-it, Bendworth." She stopped and looked at him expectantly.

It occurred to him, and not for the first time, that women couldn't mind their own business. First Ada, and now Mrs. Fawset. Must be nosing. He said nothing, but pretended to be very busy with his food and drink.

Mrs. Fawset, very fat and wheezy, suddenly became an arch matron. "Well, how is she then, your young lady? Is she coming over to see you again?"

"She's just got married," said Charlie grimly.

"Got married! Well I never!" Mrs. Fawset was at once shocked and delighted. Then she became sceptical. She had been teased before by this young man. "Go on with you."

"It's true. My sister—our Ada—has just written me this letter about it."

"But I thought she was *your* young lady—"

"Well, she isn't. Got married last Saturday. White ribbons. Notice in the paper."

It was to Mrs. Fawset's interest to keep this lodger, a decent young fellow in steady work, unmarried as long as possible, but nevertheless she seemed more indignant than he was. "Did you ever! The way some of these girls go on nowadays. Haven't the sense they were born with. And so cheeky with it, too. And you'd been going out with her—how long? You did tell me once."

"Two years, on and off."

"Two years," she continued, her voice going up and up. "And a nice steady young chap like yourself, ready to do anything for her, I'll be bound. And then when you've been away a few months, to go and get married like that, without so much as a word. Well, all I can say—and I don't care who hears me—is I hope she's gone and picked one that'll just teach her a lesson. And *they're* not hard to find. All dressed up and lah-di-dah, and then before you know where you are, asking you to keep 'em," she

## CHARLIE HABBLE'S DAY

added sternly, as if addressing an invisible row of faithless dandies. "Big, idle, good-for-nothing One of them *she's* got hold of now, you mark my word."

"Oh," said Charlie indifferently, "he's all right I know him."

"Do you know him? Well I never! That makes it a lot worse, if you know him. I can't believe he's up to much, doing a trick like that. Nor her either.' Here she advanced into the room, and resumed in a more confidential tone. "I can say now what I couldn't say before. She was your young lady then—that time she came here to her tea—and it wasn't for me to be passing remarks about her—but I did think at the time that you'd got hold of one of the flighty sort. It's a look they have in the eye. 'Nice-looking maybe,' I said to myself, that very afternoon, 'but flighty, I'll be bound. I shouldn't be surprised,' I said, 'if he doesn't find he's got a handful there.' I said them very words."

But Charlie had a good memory. He remembered how she had stopped over Daisy that afternoon and talked about her for days afterwards. And now listen to her. He grinned sceptically. "Daisy's all right. I don't wish her any harm. We hadn't fixed up anything definite."

"Well, I'm sure that's the proper way to take it," said Mrs. Fawset, who clearly thought it a wretched, spiritless way, and longed for drama. "Lucky for you, I say, you can take it that way. Lots couldn't. I don't know," she added thoughtfully, "that I could myself. But then I never could stand deceitful ways. Anything but them. Deceit I can't have, and never

could. Was your liver all right? It looked a nice piece."

"Very good." And the jilted lover nodded cheerfully, and helped himself to apricots and custard "Don't you bother about that business, Ma. They're all right, and I'm all right, and nobody's crying over it."

"Well, I always say," said Mrs. Fawset, not to be outdone in philosophical resignation, "what's got to be's got to be. And I'm sure I've had trouble enough in *my* time. But I've always told myself that what has to be has to be." And she waddled out with the remains of the liver and potatoes.

Charlie, however, was not so cheerful as he pretended to be. He had not really been deceived and jilted, for both he and Daisy had been cooling off for some months past, and they both knew it. At home, in Bendworth, they had been thrown in one another's way and so had gone out together, to whist drives and dances, to socials, to the pictures, and now and then on charabanc trips. When he had come here to Utterton, they had been separated, and there really was not enough between them to survive the separation; that was all. He did not want her very badly, and George Fletcher apparently did, and that was that. Probably she would rather have had him than George Fletcher, and if he had lost her it was his own fault. So Charlie reasoned; and he was a reasonable young man. Nevertheless, he did not feel as comfortable as these conclusions would suggest. Behind them was a feeling of desolation. The thought of Daisy Halstead had long ceased to excite him, but for all

that, she had been there, a nice girl, so much friendliness and fun, and now she was no longer there, and where she had been there was a blank. If he had had his eye on a few other girls, here in Utterton, that blank would have been welcome; but he hadn't, and here there were too many blanks.

He opened the *Daily Tribune*. It was to him "the paper," which is not quite the same as "*the* paper." But when he began a speech by saying, as he often did: "I see it says in the paper," he meant that he had found his information in the *Daily Tribune*. His attitude towards it was typical. To begin with, he had no particular respect for it. Gone was that reverence which his father and his grandfather had had for the news-sheet, the printed page. He did not believe every statement it made, nor did he disbelieve. He read it in a curious state of suspended belief or disbelief, the mood of a man at a conjuring entertainment. It left his mind bewildered, in a twilight of scepticism strangely, gaudily illuminated here and there by marvels of credulity. This, the fifty-ring circus of the *Tribune's* news and views, was not life and the world as he knew them, not Utterton and Bendworth and himself and Daisy Halstead and Mrs. Fawset, but of course it might easily be life and the world as they existed anywhere else. And he could not help being flattered by the endless attentions of the *Tribune*, which was only too willing to do everything for him on earth and then to see that he was in a fair way to reach the right Heaven. He felt that it was a grand penny-worth, no matter whether it lied or told the truth.

There was something wrong with the day when he missed the *Tribune*. But there was something wrong with this day even though he had his paper, and was even now picking up bits of news from it about the Prime Minister, Germany, Russia, a murder case, football, boxing, and the film stars. Normally he might have spent the next hour or so with it, sitting in the arm-chair and smoking a cigarette or two. To-day, however, he felt too restless to stay in at all. That blank where Daisy Halstead had been worried him. He wanted to go somewhere, to do something.

Upstairs, putting on his collar and tie, he began to regret ever having left Bendworth, which was his own town, where he was somebody. For years he had played football there, finally having two seasons, as left half-back, with the Bendworth Town A.F.C. Reserves, so that nearly all local followers of the game knew Charlie Habble by sight and repute. He was one of the best snooker-players in the Fridley Road Men's Club, where he was Charlie to everybody. He had several good pals, and a fine range of acquaintances. There were some girls, too. He was a figure in the town. Here in Utterton, even after several months, he was just a chap who worked at the Associated Coal Products place and lodged in Duck Street. He was reasonable: he knew that he had been fortunate to be transferred from his job with the Coke Company at Bendworth to the A.C.P. here, for he was in steady work at three pounds a week when half the men he knew were on the dole. So far as work was concerned, he was one of the lucky ones. He had nobody dependent upon him,

for both his parents were dead and one sister married and the other in regular work; but no family man could have had a greater horror of losing his job. He had had one long spell of unemployment and knew what it meant: at first the hopeful visits to this firm and that; then the long queues at the Labour Exchange; then the apathetic groups at street corners; the slow and subtle degradation of it all, with idleness, defeated hope, under-nourishment, stupid bullying officialism, all slaving like so many tunnelling companies to undermine a man's self-respect. Charlie, an active and independent fellow, looked back on that period almost as if he had spent it in prison. Anything but that. Therefore, being in good work here, he knew that he ought not to grumble. Yet now he found himself grumbling hard. Wearing a tweed cap and carrying a raincoat, he marched out of 12, Duck Street at ten minutes to two, in the somewhat forlorn hope of finding some diversion.

Some people imagine that the industrial population of this country has at its command an unlimited supply of amusements on which it wastes its time and money. There is talk of decadent Rome, of games and circuses. Such people should spend a week working on the night shift at Utterton and trying to amuse themselves there in the afternoon, the night-worker's leisure period. Utterton is one of those small gloomy towns in the North

Midlands, and its chief concerns are coal and various chemical products of the more unpleasant kind, such as acids and explosives. Its ten thousand inhabitants are housed monotonously behind blackened bricks. A tram or bus will soon take you out of the town, but the neighbouring countryside is depressing, having paid a stiff price for its coal and chemicals, and it implores you to forget about it and lose yourself in the town. But an ordinary afternoon in Utterton, even if the weather should happen to be fine, does not offer many attractions. Even the largest of the shops, the Utterton Co-operative Society's store, does not invite the passer-by to linger at its windows. There is a Free Library, but its reading-room is always filled with unemployed men, staring glumly at photographs of society beauties or polo teams until they are able to grab hold of a periodical that means something to them. There are no less than three picture-theatres in the town, but unfortunately they do not open until six o'clock on ordinary weekdays. There are football-matches in winter and cricket-matches in summer, but only on Saturdays or an occasional Thursday, when the shops are closed. You can, of course, go and stare at the canal, mostly oil and coal-dust; or at the little railway station, where ironical poster artists implore you to winter in Cairo; or at the fronts of the closed picture-theatres; or at your idle fellow-citizens, who stand about at every corner, but are in their thickest clusters in the Market Square, where they can watch the trams and buses arrive and depart, and catch the flying rumours of three o'clock winners. To these

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varied delights, on this Tuesday afternoon, there hurried that new decadent Roman, that pampered child of games and circuses, Charlie Habble. He took one look at the familiar Market Square, into which a little spring sunlight was faintly filtering, and then disappeared into the Smoke Room entrance of the largest public-house there, the "Blue Bell."

It would be easy to show the "Blue Bell" crowded with poor sodden wretches who, urged and goaded by a merciless publican and his staff, were eagerly soaking in alcohol in order to forget their responsibilities and to give themselves courage to go back home, smash the furniture, beat their wives, and starve their children to death. It would be equally easy to show the "Blue Bell" as a place of roaring good-fellowship, with a Christmas-card atmosphere; the "Boar's Head," Eastcheap, and the "White Hart" out of *Pickwick*; good old ale, ripe characters, story and song; Merrie England and down-a-down-derry. Unfortunately neither of these fine and satisfying pictures would be anything but false. Behind the bar were two bored girls and a young man who loudly sucked at a hollow tooth; and in front of it were a few men who did not seem to be busy either drinking themselves to death or achieving any miracles of good-fellowship. There were neither drunken curses nor shouts of laughter. The general atmosphere was like that of the Market Square itself, one of apathetic waiting: the barmaids were waiting for closing time; their customers were waiting for somebody they knew to arrive or for some moment to strike, a quarter-past or half-past; the

place itself, like the whole town outside, seemed to be waiting for something to happen that it could hardly believe now would happen. Once inside, Charlie Habble knew immediately that the "Blue Bell" would not cheer him up, but then he had not entertained great hopes of it.

The taller barmaid, who knew him by sight, brightened a little when she saw him, and as she set his glass of bitter on the counter she condescended to observe that his friend had not been in lately. As this "friend"—for barmaids, whose work and outlook give them a rather too rosate view of masculine life and its relationships, are fond of this talk of "friends"—was simply a man he had picked up one night there, a man he had never seen before or since, Charlie did not care whether the chap had been in or not, but he felt flattered by the barmaid's interest in him. It did not flatter his male vanity, for the young woman did not attract him at all; but it increased his self-respect and dignity as a citizen. He was noticed in the "Blue Bell," and that was something. It gave him some sort of standing in the place.

He took his glass over to a shallow alcove, lit a cigarette, and, despairing of any other entertainment, began to read the *Daily Tribune* he had brought with him. He had been reading several minutes when the sound of a new voice, a loud voice that did not speak with the local accent, made him look up. It came from a fattish chap who was ordering his drink at the bar. Having got his drink, a whisky, this chap turned and made for the alcove in which Charlie was sitting. He had a very red face

and a tremendous fleshy nose, which looked as if it might have been broken at some time or other. The hand that was not carrying the drink was swinging a flat leather case. This case suddenly opened and shot a number of large sheets of paper, white sheets with figures on them and blue sheets with drawings on them, on the floor between its owner and Charlie, who immediately leaned forward and helped the man, who was swearing heartily, to pick them up. Now purple in the face, the man sat down beside Charlie and thanked him briefly.

"Have a drink." It was more a command than a question.

Charlie was diffident. "Well, I don't know—"

"Of course you know. You want a drink. Must have a drink. What's that stuff? Bitter? Here," he shouted, to the astonishment of the "Blue Bell," "glass of bitter for this gentleman." He then carefully examined the contents of his case, and did not speak again until the beer had been brought and he had paid for it.

"Well, here's luck," he cried, swallowing half his whisky. "Live here?"

"I do now," Charlie explained, "but I don't belong here. I really come from Bendworth."

"Bendworth? I know it. Bad as this place. I hate these little towns, hate the lot of 'em. Don't stay a minute longer in 'em than I can help—not a minute, not a second."

"It all depends what you're used to," Charlie ventured cautiously.

"Not a bit of it. Shouldn't be used to anything. Don't let 'em put that over on you, my friend."

Don't have it. If they tell you that you're used to it, tell 'em to go to hell."

Charlie could not quite follow this, not knowing who "they" were, so he said nothing, but told himself that this was a very queer fellow, probably a Londoner.

"What's your name? Don't mind me asking, but always like to know a man's name. Never forget it either. None of this know-your-face-but-can't-remember-your-name stuff about me."

Charlie told him.

"Mine's Otley—Finnigan Otley. Ever heard it?"

"No, I can't say I have," said Charlie apologetically.

"No, you wouldn't have," said Mr. Otley bitterly. "Not blaming you, not your fault at all. It's the damned system. I'm an inventor. And when I say I'm an inventor," he added, with astonishing passion, "I mean I'm an inventor. I *invent*. I save you time and trouble. Even this hole's full of inventions. Those beer engines behind the bar there, look at the time and trouble they save. All right. Somebody must have invented 'em, mustn't they? Well, who was it? You don't know. They don't know. Nobody in this damned beer-house knows. And that's being an inventor."

"But you didn't invent them?" said Charlie, bewildered.

"Don't be a damn fool," the other roared good-humouredly. "Of course I didn't. Long before my time. But *somebody* did. That's my point. And I'm inventing things as good, yes, and better—now, this minute—this case is full of things as good—but no-

body in this town knows *my* name. And nobody in this town seems to want to know it. You've got two or three new developments in this place, new developments in industry, but the way they're being run, they'll be old-fashioned and done with before you can turn round. That's England. One step forward and then—let's all go to sleep for a hundred years. And if we're not careful, it's going to be a longer sleep than that. Why am I here?"

Charlie didn't know.

"I'm here to try and interest some of your local numskulls in one or two of my patents. I've spent all this morning and the whole of yesterday trying to wipe the cobwebs out of their eyes. And now"—and here Mr. Otley pointed a short fat forefinger at the top button of his companion's waistcoat—"I give 'em eighteen hours, that's all—eighteen more hours. After that, I take the train back to town. Have another drink."

"No, it's my turn."

"All right, then. Your turn. Hello, here's a fellow I met last night. Another stranger within the gates. Hey, Kibworth!"

Kibworth came across. He was a fellow about Charlie's age or perhaps a little older, shabbily dressed. He had a lean and twisted face. There was something rather wolfish about him, but he did not look a bad sort.

He grinned at Mr. Otley. "Well, Professor."

"Well, Comrade Kibworth, and how do you feel to-day?"

"Not so bad. But I want a drink."

"You're just going to get one. And this is Mr.

Charlie Habble, citizen of Utterton. And this is Comrade Kibworth. Take a good look at him. He's a revolutionary, a communist. Big money from Russia. Not safe in your bed when he's about. Wanted by the C.I.D. Tracked by the secret police. And drinks gin, of all things."

"Well, he'd better have one now," said Charlie hospitably, though he reflected that the price of a whisky and a gin added to his own modest bitter was going to make this encounter rather expensive.

"That's all right. I look after the comrade," said Mr. Otley. "Can't have good citizens standing him drinks. Get you a bad name in the town."

"Live here?" asked Kibworth.

Charlie explained that he had come to Utterton with the Associated Coal Products.

"Trying to make petrol out of coal, eh?"

"That's the idea," said Charlie. "At least it's one of 'em. We're making it too. Coaleen, we call it."

Mr. Otley nodded. "Low carbonisation and then acid treatment, that's it, isn't it?"

"That's it," said Charlie, "more or less."

"I know a bit about this business," Kibworth remarked. "You've got something there, haven't you? Pretty good stuff, isn't it?"

"It's lively enough," Charlie told him. "Worse to handle than any petrol. We've got to be careful."

"That's all right." Mr. Otley waved his hand. "But it costs too much. Isn't that so? Bet you five shillings I'm right."

"I believe that is so," Charlie replied cautiously. "But we haven't been on long. Just experimenting, as you might say. From what I hear, they're getting

the cost of the process down all the time. I don't pretend to know a lot about it. I was working for a coke company over at Bendworth, and then the A.C.P. bought 'em up, and I got a job here."

"What are you doing here then, chum?" Kibworth demanded sharply.

"Having a drink." And Charlie looked him in the eye. Charlie was quiet enough, but you had not got to talk to him like that.

"In other words, minding his own business, Comrade," cried Mr. Otley, grinning.

"If he's a worker," said Kibworth stoutly, "then his business is my business, whether he likes it or not. And if he thinks he ought to take offence, he can. There's been a hell of a sight too much of this minding your own business. Look where it's landed us—with no business to mind."

"All right," said Charlie, who saw that Kibworth had meant no personal offence, "there's no mystery about it. I'm on the night turn this week. That's why I'm here. Nothing else to do."

"What a place, and what a life!" And Mr. Otley blew out his capacious crimson cheeks.

"It's not so bad." Charlie had no intention of being pitied and patronised by these strangers.

"And anyhow, what are you doing, Professor, to change it?" Kibworth jeered.

"I answered that last night, my friend. Get it into your head this time, even though Karl Marx didn't write it. I'm doing more than you are to change and improve it, and I'm doing that by sweating blood to make things that'll save time and trouble."

"And put a lot more poor devils out of work," the other retorted quickly.

"Not my lookout. That's the system."

"Of course it is. That's why we're going to change it." Kibworth's voice rose triumphantly. He flung out a large knobbly hand. "I tell you, Professor, you'll have to come in with us, and work for the dictatorship of the proletariat."

"Damn and blast the proletariat," Mr. Otley roared, though all in good-humour. "Why should they do any dictating? I'm only sorry for 'em—when I *am* sorry for 'em—because they're down. Put 'em up in the world, let 'em start dictating, and I've no more use for 'em than I have for the jackasses we've got now. And who are the proletariat, anyhow?"

"You are and I am and he is."

"Not we. It's a bit of a theory, a name out of a book, that's all it is. Damn it!—it's not real. That's why I've no use for it."

They did not stop there but went at it, ding-dong, for the next quarter of an hour. Charlie kept quiet. He could follow the argument, and now agreed with one, now with another, but could not join in because he could never find the words in time. One of the great divisions of mankind is that between those who enjoy argument and debate and those who distrust and despise such talk. Charlie belonged to the former class, though he might at first sight appear to be one of the opposite party. Now he congratulated himself on having found this odd pair.

The "Blue Bell" announced that it was about to close for the afternoon and very soon had deposited

its patrons on the pavement outside, where a light shower of rain was falling.

"If you boys would like to come round to my temporary abode," said Mr. Otley, "I could show you one or two little things that might interest you."

The boys were willing. Mr. Otley marched them down Broad Lane, and finally stopped outside a large house at the corner of Chapel Street, a house that announced its connection with the *Midland Widows' Assurance Co.* on one side, and with *Delecta Corsets* on the other, and did not appear to be making much out of either. Mr. Otley occupied a bed-sitting room on the first floor. It belonged, he explained, to an acquaintance of his, a commercial traveller, who was away and had lent it to him. It was a purplish room and smelled strongly of whisky and moth-balls.

## 3

"You boys know anything about mechanics?" Mr. Otley asked. "I mean the science of mechanics, not a lot of fellows in dungarees with smudges across their damned low foreheads. How the wheels go round—that's what I mean."

"I know a bit," said Kibworth. "Though it's not my line."

"We know it isn't. Your line's agitation, sabotage, revolution, and what not. A dangerous devil you are, and why I asked you up to my room I don't know when you've probably got the police on your track."

"And that's truer than you think," said Kibworth,

lowering his voice. He looked enquiringly at Charlie.

"All right," said Charlie, who was no fool about such glances. "You needn't look at me. I wouldn't give you away." But he suspected that Kibworth was trying to appear important. He had met that kind before.

"Didn't think you would, comrade. But sometimes, you see, it's better not to know things. But if you don't care, I don't." Kibworth gave a quick glance round, as if there might be a detective looking in at the window or peering out of the big wardrobe. "I didn't say anything before because a pub's not the place to open your mouth about these things. But they're after me all right. I told you last night they would be. I can't go back to where I was lodging, that's a cert. And I can't catch that train to-night, that's another cert. I might jump a lorry and get out that way. It's about my only chance. Once you've been spotted, these little towns are useless—can't move in 'em."

Mr. Otley was sceptical. "Who's going to spot you here? Look at the place. You don't mean to tell me you're running round frightened of the Utterton constabulary."

"Of course I'm not. But Scotland Yard's sent a man down here. I've seen him, though he's not seen me yet."

Mr. Otley whistled.

"Now you see why I've to be careful. And I've got to be doing something before to-night. But let's get back to the subject. I was saying mechanics wasn't my line."

"And I was telling you what your line was."

"No, you've got it wrong. I may be a propagandist just now, but by trade I'm an electrical engineer, and though I like working for the cause, the sooner I can get back to electrical engineering the better. And I like to see the wheels going round."

"So do I," said Charlie. "Always been interested. I started as a fitter. But you know what fitters get nowadays, when they can get a job—and that's not often."

"I do, comrade," Kibworth began, "and I can tell you another thing—"

"Oh, for God's sake!" cried Mr. Otley. "No more propaganda this afternoon. We know, we know all about it, and you've no need to tell us. But I'll show you something now. Just a minute." They were sitting round a table, and on this table Mr. Otley now placed a neat wooden box, out of which he carefully lifted a shining little piece of machinery, not unlike those made out of boys' mechanical sets, but much more complicated. It was beautifully constructed, and all three men gazed at it in delight, mixed with reverence. Mr. Otley's large face bore the proud and happy look of the successful creator. Kibworth's deep-set eyes glowed with enthusiasm, and he forgot about the class war and the man from Scotland Yard. Charlie, as much a child of the mechanical age as the other two, momentarily lost himself and his growing dissatisfactions and found instead the pure pleasure of an intelligence recognising a symbol of power and beauty. For a few seconds, the commercial

traveller's purplish and smelly room became a chapel of some strange religion, a sanctuary of the spirit.

"And before I explain it," said the high priest, "I think we might all have a nip of whisky. You two'll have to turn whisky drinkers, because I've nothing else. But why not? I've tried 'em all, every kind of rot-gut there is, and whisky's the best." He brought out a tumbler, a green wineglass, and a cup, and out of these they drank to the success of the model in whisky and water.

"And now I'll show you. This isn't perpetual motion. I'm not cracked. But it conserves power, and on a big scale, with two or three thousand times more weight to everything, and far less friction in the bearings—you get far too much in these small-scale models—it'll save proportionately more energy. Watch this."

His forefinger carefully released a small weight, and then—*click-click-click*, the model turned into enchanting motion. Charlie was completely captivated by it. The boy in him adored this miniature machinery, the very sight of the tiny but beautifully efficient wheels and shafts and belts; and the more mature part of him was eager to understand the principles of the mechanism.

"You've got to show it doing something," said Mr. Otley. "A machine must work something. So this is adapted for this endless belt with exchanges. You see. There. Used in assembling standardised articles, from cars and gramophones to little toys. Look. And notice how long it's been going. You don't want figures, but you can see for yourselves

how little initial push it wants." And he became technical, pointing out his various little devices. He had a good audience, which is probably why he took so much trouble to show them everything, for it appeared as if he had not had a very good reception from Utterton.

"In my opinion, comrade," said Kibworth solemnly, after his second whisky, "you're a great man. You don't want to stay here and let the capitalists cheat you. Why don't you go to Russia? They want men like you."

"I've been. But soon came away. Couldn't stand it."

"Why, what's wrong with it? You're no bourgeois."

"I don't know whether I'm a bourgeois or not," replied the inventor severely. "I don't know and I don't damned well care. But I do like my meals to be punctual. Every meal I had in Russia was two hours late, two solid hours. Nearly drove me mad."

"That's nothing. I'd have thought a chap like you wouldn't care when he got his food."

"Then you'd have thought wrong. I can live on short rations—and have lived on damned little—but I do like my food to be on time. Food first, and talk afterwards—that's my motto. But in Russia—it's talk first, and anything else a long time afterwards, and it didn't suit me."

"It wouldn't me either," said Charlie. Then, to Kibworth: "Have you been to Russia?"

"Yes. Two years ago."

"Did you like it?"

Kibworth held up a long stained forefinger, as if demanding their best attention. "When you're hearing about Russia, you mustn't get two different things mixed up. You go to Russia, and what you see there's Russian communism. Isn't that right?"

"It was too right for me," Mr. Otley interjected.

"Yes, but listen. Russian communism's a mixture of Russia and communism. And you mustn't get them mixed up, comrades. I liked the communism. So would you. So would anybody who wasn't a rotten bourgeois. But I didn't much care for the Russian part of it. When they talk too much, and come late, and forget to oil the bearings, and leave their wiring uncovered, it's not because they're communists, but because they're Russians. They've got their own ways of doing things—always had and always will have, if you ask me. They're Russian communists. We'll be English communists. Quite different. But if you think we haven't a lot to learn from them, you've got it all wrong."

"Then I've got it all wrong," said Mr. Otley. "And I'll keep it all wrong, thank you. But that doesn't mean I'm going to stay here. This isn't an industrial country any more. It's something between a bankrupt teashop and a golf links. When the financial business is a bit more settled, I'm going to try South America. Here, have another nip. And now I'll show you something else."

By the time he had shown them that something else, had tried to make them understand exactly how it worked and what it would save, and they had admired and listened and argued all over again, it was tea-time, and Charlie, feeling muzzy with

whisky, a liquor to which he was not accustomed, especially at this time of day, had to summon up enough energy to tell them that he had to go to work that evening and must leave them. He said he was sorry, and he meant it. His natural modesty and good-humour, the talk and the whisky, all these conspired together to make him feel that he had been lucky to come across two such good fellows and to spend so good an afternoon. Here was something to remember, to think about. "Thanks very much," he repeated earnestly. "But I must be off, though. Wish I hadn't."

Kibworth looked at him solemnly. "Where do you work, comrade?"

Charlie told him: the A.C.P. place, down by the canal, next door to the big chemical works.

"Chemicals!" cried Kibworth. "You mean explosives. That's what they make there. Enough to blow half the county to hell, somebody told me."

"Well, don't get so excited about it, my friend," said Mr. Otley. "And don't start again on your No-More-War campaign. There are more uses for explosives than to fill bombs and shells."

"Yes, but not many," he retorted, with sinister emphasis. Then turning to Charlie again: "But you don't mean to tell me you're running day and night shifts at your place, trying to turn coal into oil fuel?"

Charlie explained that certain things—and he was intentionally vague, for their processes were secret, and all of them had been warned to keep their mouths shut if they wanted to stay there—had to be kept going and watched at night, and so they had

a tiny skeleton staff on the 'night shift, a foreman engineer, Charlie himself and another young man, and an old fellow at the gate.

"I expect you're all asleep half the night," Kibworth replied to this.

"Oh no, we're not," said Charlie, not without importance. "Too risky. Sometimes we feel like dropping off, but we've got to stick it."

"Any visitors allowed?"

"No. Against orders. But I don't say a chap's pal mightn't look in at times, to have a word with him. That's all right. But there's no looking round, y'know."

"Well, don't worry. I don't want to know your secrets." Kibworth laughed harshly. Then he looked hard at Charlie. "But you've seen me all this afternoon. You see what I am. I'm a communist. All right. I want a revolution. All right. But I'm a worker like yourself, comrade, and I wouldn't do you any harm. I'm out for your good. And I'm in a nasty place here. I've been in worse and got out of 'em, but I'll tell you straight—and I have told you straight, haven't I, so far?—I'm in a nasty place. You'd do me a good turn if you could, wouldn't you, comrade?"

Charlie heard himself replying earnestly that he would.

Kibworth shook hands with him. "That's all right then. I know I can trust you, comrade. You're a worker, a man. You don't want to see those fat-bellied bourgeois kicking hell out of me, do you? Of course you don't. That's all right then. Leave it at that."

Somewhat bewildered by all this, Charlie was glad to leave it at that. Then suddenly shy and polite, he thanked his host for letting him see the models and plans, for his talk, his whisky, for everything, and descended into an Utterton strangely commonplace after this session of inventions and communism and visits to Russia and South America, and now darkening and uncomfortable under one of the sudden downpours of early spring.

"Nay, I thought you were lost," Mrs. Fawset exclaimed, as she put his pot of tea on the table, after giving him several sharp and curious glances. "Wherever did you get to?"

## 4

Those drinks had been a mistake. Charlie reproached himself severely for taking them. He was sober enough but very sleepy, and there was a long night's work in front of him. The work was not hard, much easier than that on the ordinary day shift, for it consisted chiefly in keeping an eye on the various gauges; but it was absolutely necessary to be awake most of the time, and not merely half-awake, but fully alert. He had had many a ten minutes' nap before now, but to-night he was so drowsy that he was convinced that if he once settled in a corner and closed his eyes he would go soundly off, perhaps for hours. He had felt it coming over him on the way from his lodgings, in spite of the fresh evening, with a wind blowing the rain away; but now, in the close factory, it was ten times worse.

He went about his work yawning. His eyelids seemed to be enormously heavy. If he leaned against the wall for a minute, he could feel himself drooping, relaxing, sinking away. To sit down and be comfortable would be fatal. This stuff like petrol they were making, which the heads had decided to call *Coaleen*, was supposed to be very dangerous, almost as hard to handle safely in bulk as the proper explosives they made next door; but Charlie, who did not take very long views in these matters, was not afraid of any disaster in the works. What he was afraid of was Oglesby, the works manager, a very keen youngish fellow, who had a nasty habit of swooping down upon them from his bungalow about four miles away. He would take it into his head to pay them a visit at eleven or even twelve and later, perhaps after he had been seeing some friends or attending a dance, and his fierce little car would be inside the yard and he himself inside the building, firing questions at you and looking at this and that, before you knew where you were. And let Oglesby catch him asleep, and Charlie knew that next week it would be the queue at the Labour Exchange for him; and God only knew where the next job would come from. And of course the night that Charlie found himself too drowsy to keep awake would be sure to be a night when Oglesby would pounce upon them. That is how things work out. Charlie had no doubt about that. And he would prop his eyelids up with match-stalks before he would risk losing his job.

After two hours or so had lumbered by, there were three Charlies. The first, a mechanical

creature, almost an automaton, was still busy with his appointed tasks, watching the little red pointers and now and then turning a lever this way and that. The second was a desperate little fellow, with a will of his own, and now exerting it to prevent the first Charlie from merging into the third. This last was a huge, sleepy, vague being who was everywhere but in the A.C.P. works, who blinked and stared at sudden and brief dreams like unexpected glimpses of an endless film, who walked with Daisy Halstead again in Bendworth, passed the ball down the centre to the inside-left, talked about Russia and inventions, and tried in a cloudy sort of fashion to drag the other two away and drown them in sleep.

Then these three became in an instant one startled Charlie confronting a mysterious figure in a raincoat and with a very wet felt hat pulled down over its eyes. The hat was whisked off and shaken. It was Kibworth, the Communist.

"Here I say," cried Charlie, startled into unfriendly speech, "what are you doing here?"

Kibworth came closer. He gave a quick grin that made his lean twisted face look more lean and twisted than ever. "Dodged in. That old chap in the gate never saw me."

"Well, what is it? What's up? You can't stay here, you know."

"Listen, chum. You remember what I said this afternoon? Well, I'm on the run. You've got to let me stay here. Nobody knows I came here and they'd never think of looking here. Let me get into a corner here for a few hours, just to get a bit of sleep

and dry my clothes. I've been wet through for the last two hours, and I'm all in, honestly I am, comrade. I had pneumonia last year and if I get it again, it's all up with me. Nobody will know I've been here. You won't know yourself in ten minutes, if you let me find a warm corner. Then when I've had some sleep and I'm dry, I'll be off again, and you won't even know I've gone, see? You don't know I'm here. Forget about me, chum. That's all I want. And if I am found—and I won't be—but if I am, I don't know you and you don't know me, never seen one another before. Corr, but I'm cold."

He shivered.

Charlie did not like it, but he had not the heart to turn him away, particularly now that the poor devil had such a miserable hunted look about him. "All right, mate," he said quietly. "But we'll have to be careful. The foreman's mostly at the other end, looking after the big oven, but he takes a walk round here now and again. Let me see now." And he rubbed his chin reflectively.

"Don't you bother, comrade," said the other gratefully. "Leave it to me. The less you know about it, the better."

"Yes, but be careful. This isn't an ordinary sort of place, you know. You've got to be specially careful. No striking matches and all that."

"I know. Leave it to me." He began tip-toeing away, and Charlie mechanically followed him. They arrived at the passage that led to the large storage tank. Kibworth stopped, stared at the wall, then turned. "That wiring doesn't look too good to me," he whispered.

"It's all right," replied Charlie indifferently. Evidently Kibworth wanted to show off a bit because he had once been an electrician, and Charlie did not propose to play audience to him.

"Well, just you go as far as the gate, chum, and forget you ever saw me."

Charlie did as he suggested. He walked back slowly to the gate, and had a word or two with old Hinds, who was dozing in his little wooden hut there. For a few minutes he felt more wakeful than he had done all evening, but it did not last. And his second fit of drowsiness was far worse than the first. He was leg weary too and found himself compelled to sit down. In a corner there was an upturned box on which he generally sat to eat his supper. It was still too early for that, but he soon found himself sitting in the corner. His head sank slowly back, fitting not uncomfortably at last into the angle of the two walls. His eyes closed and his mouth fell open. He was asleep. . . .

It might have been either the battering splintering sound or the smell of burning that awakened him. Both sensations were there, waiting for him in a world gone mad. After a moment of complete stillness, all ear and nostril, he hurried round the corner and down the passage. It was thick with smoke. A figure brushed past him, shouted something unintelligible, and then was gone. Bewildered, dizzy, he was in the midst of fumes and smouldering woodwork. He was holding an axe. His left coat sleeve was singeing. He tried to shout but coughed and spluttered instead, and the fumes made his eyes water and blinded him. He tried to

do something with his coat sleeve. The arm inside was being pricked by a million hot needles. Awkwardly he tugged at the sleeve and the axe he was still holding swung backward and hit him on the shin. All this happened in the first few seconds. . . .

## CHAPTER TWO

### "PRESS"

1

HAROLD WENIWORTH KINNEY, known to all readers of the *Daily Tribune* and the *Sunday Courier* as Hal Kinney, sat in a corner of a first-class carriage in the afternoon express out of St. Pancras, and gave himself up, almost voluptuously, to uneasiness, a gigantic possessive uneasiness, both mental and physical. It was partly the result of indigestion, for he had bolted a large lunch and had had several drinks, and had foolishly forgotten to bring some bi-carbonate of soda with him. It was partly the result of temperament, for he was nearly always uneasy. But now, in addition, there were some special circumstances, which he gloomily reviewed. To begin with, he did not like the way his editor, Shuckleworth of the *Tribune*, had spoken to him that morning. He did not like being sent off in this fashion to see what he could make out of this Stoneley story. He was not a reporter, a news-gatherer, an interviewer, not even a special correspondent, though he had been all these in his time. He was Hal Kinney, whose superb journalistic sense and broad human touch had made him one of the outstanding personalities of Fleet Street. Soberly he considered himself a more important

person on the *Tribune* than its editor, Shuckleworth. Editors came and went, and the public neither knew nor cared. If Shuckleworth disappeared to-morrow, Kinney told himself, no *Tribune* or *Sunday Courier* reader would know or care, whereas if the *Sunday Courier* began to appear without Hal Kinney's weekly article (*Another Amazing Article Next Week*, it was always announced), if his name vanished from the *Tribune*, there would soon be a rumpus, as they discovered a year ago, when he was ill. The proprietor himself knew Kinney better than he knew Shuckleworth, and paid him as much money and rather more attention.

Then why had Shuckleworth been so cool and sharp with him that morning? And why had he been packed off to these filthy Midlands, like one of their ordinary crime-and-accident hounds? True, if the Stoneley story yielded anything, if it could be bounced from news of a silly boy's infatuation and suicide into a Warning to Parents, a Moral Lesson for the Nation, then he was the man to write the big splashed feature: that was his job. But he could have written it just as well in town. They could have sent down somebody much less important to get a few more details. Nobody knew better than he did, the splasher-in-chief, that they needed something to splash. For weeks now, he had not been given a news-story of the kind he liked, something that gave him an excuse for colossal breadth and humanity, that encouraged him to take the whole million and a half *Tribune* readers by the arm and address them as men and brothers.

Perhaps this move, sending him down in person to see the parents, was simply one of despair: they dare not risk the only big story in sight with anybody else. This was consoling, but it did not really satisfy Kinney, who could not forget Shuckleworth's tone and look. He suspected intrigues, of which the *Tribune* office had more than its share. In one of his most expansive articles, he had once described the staff as a “happy band of brothers,” and had hurled great verbal bouquets at all his colleagues—but privately he had no illusions. At this very moment, somebody might be pulling wires like the devil to get him out. Shuckleworth himself, for one, could not be trusted a yard.

Uncertainty and uneasiness were for ever gnawing at Kinney. The only place where he was free was in print, and there he was always four times as large as life and more confident about everything than anybody has a right to be about anything. No shadow of doubt had ever fallen on one of his articles or featured stories, and a good brass band, bursting into a fortissimo march, could not have sounded more sure of itself. Moreover, having been something of a public figure for some years, he now looked the part and lived up to the “Hal.” He was biggish and fleshy, had thick greying hair, dogmatic eyebrows, massive ruddy cheeks; was assertive, hearty, impudent, hail-fellow-well-met, and successfully embodied the broad human touch, the big popular appeal.

A close observer, however, would have noticed the Harold Wentworth Kinney shuffling and peering behind the brazen façade of Hal Kinney. There

was something wrong with the eyes and the mouth, with his movements, and even with his voice when he was off his guard. The man inside was pitifully uncertain, and suffered badly from a want of the faintest stiffening of that brass-bound assurance which belonged only to the journalist at work. He was uncertain and uneasy about life and death, about the state of the world, the condition of the country, about his own position, though all these were among his loudest topics. A wicked irony had long been at work with his life. Rebuking the cynics and the pessimists, he would shout in print about Friendship and Love, and he had no real friends and had been made miserable by love. After various unsatisfactory adventures, the kind of adventures that publicly shocked him when he met them in contemporary fiction, he had fallen in love with and married a girl eighteen years younger than himself, a pale-cheeked, dark-eyed creature whom he had found contributing social and fashion gossip to the *Sunday Courier*. He had taken her away from her bed-sitting room and scratchy living, and had made her queen it in a fine service flat in Knightsbridge. For a year he had been happy, but then one night when they had had a slight quarrel, nothing more than that, she had looked hard at him. After that one curious look, it had been all different. And that was two years ago. Never since then had he found himself able to be expansive with her and read out the article he had just written. It was as if she had changed into another person, and a person who looked right through him. Now he fancied all the time that she was in love with somebody else

and was steadily and merrily unfaithful to him; but he had no proof at all, not a fact to throw in the grave face she showed him, that maddening baffling face with its faint hint of irony. It was damnable. At this very moment, while he was going down into the country like any *Central News* hack, she was probably hanging on to the lapels of some fellow's coat and laughing at the latest trick they had played upon him. His wife, Hal Kinney's wife! Yet he could not do anything, did not really know anything. There he was, a fool in the dark.

So what with one thing and another—Shuckleworth's manner; this Stoneley story he had to ferret out; the thought of his wife's possible adventures during his absence—Kinney took down with him into the Midlands a triple burden of uncertainty and uneasiness. The natural result was that after three hours of it in solitude he stepped out of the train more Hal Kinney, bluff King Hal, than ever, ready to show anybody and everybody that he was the great brazen voice of the colossal *Daily Tribune*, the titanic *Sunday Courier*. A porter came shambling up, a poor creature with watery eyes, a drooping and ragged moustache, and retreating grey stubble for a chin, and for a second or so Kinney stared at him. He had only to write half a column about this obscure drudge, he reflected jubilantly, with a swelling sense of power, and he could set half Britain talking about him, could turn the poor devil into something like a national figure. "Get me a car," he commanded sharply, handing over his small bag. The porter was impressed. Kinney felt better.

The car was a large antique, very high and with very nearly as much brasswork as a roundabout. Kinney did not like the look of it, but there did not seem to be any other free. And it was now raining.

"I want to go," Kinney began, speaking very distinctly, "to Red House, Hatch Brow, near Northdean. Do you know where it is?"

"No, sir. But I can find it." The driver was a small man with a large flat face. He looked a character, Kinney concluded, but at that moment Kinney did not want a character, but a reliable driver who would know something about the district.

"That's not good enough," said Kinney. "We can't go wandering off in the rain without knowing where we're going. Do you know where Northdean is?"

"Yes. It's some time since I was there, but I can find it all right. It's a fair distance from here, you know, sir."

"I was told that this was the best station for Northdean," cried Kinney angrily.

This seemed to please the driver. He rocked a little in his seat. "No, no," he caroled happily. "Oh no, no, no. You was told wrong, sir. You was told wrong."

"All right, all right. Well, you get there as soon as you can. Red House, Hatch Brow, near Northdean."

"It'll be a tidy journey."

"All right. You'll be paid for it. Don't worry."

"Hatch House?"

“Red House, Hatch Brow, near Northdean. Got it? Well, be as quick as you can.”

Kinney climbed into the dark leathery interior of this antique monster of a car, lit a cigarette, and stared out at the small wet town through which they were moving by what seemed a series of leaps. But very soon the heavy rain made it impossible to look out of the windows, and there was nothing to be seen but the driver's humped back, which announced in every line and lump that it had no confidence in this journey.

## 2

Kinney had ample time to think about the Stoneley story, to consider how he would approach the parents, and to begin shaping his article. There might or might not be something in this story for the *Tribune*—that would depend on what the parents told him—but there was certainly a *Sunday Courier* article in it. Already he was beginning to describe his visit to the sorrowing and suffering parents, his journey through a grey and sodden countryside to the grief-stricken home, and he could catch an occasional glimpse of the end of the article, which would be incandescent in a white heat of moral indignation. A Boy's Mad Devotion. Vampire Women. A Career Flung Away. What Is Your Boy Doing? The Moth and the Candle. A Mother's Appeal. A Father's Indictment. The time has come for us to face these things. The nation's young life is being polluted. Women who are like cancers

in the social body. Are they being employed : foreign agents? The new sinister secret service Stranger than any film. But what happened the last fatal night at the flat? Did Stoneley send confession to his parents? The full story at last And a lesson to us all. Such phrases, most of which he had often used before, jumped into Kinney mind, keeping pace with the uncomfortable hops and leaps of the car itself.

It was a not unfamiliar little tragedy. Hugh McNair Stoneley, the only son of a retired Indian Civil servant, was a very promising young flying officer a good-looking boy, an athlete, and a great favourite in his squadron. He had got entangled in an affair with a woman much older than himself, but a woman of considerable beauty and even more considerable experience, who had occasionally done a little stage and film work, but who chiefly lived by her wits. (Beautiful, brilliant, but heartless, Kinney told himself. One of those lovely parasites that infest—no, that would not do, but something like that—the West End.) Stoneley had fallen madly in love with her. He had not much money, but he had contrived to spend a good deal on her, far more than he could afford. Also, he had been drinking fairly heavily. Finally, after several scenes at frequent intervals, he had had a tremendous quarrel with her in her flat, and she had walked out and left him there, only to discover, when she returned three hours later, that he had shot himself. The note he left for her she had destroyed, and she was now in a nursing home and could not be seen. But Stoneley had written another letter, which he had given to

the porter to post. The porter remembered the letter, but did not know to whom it was addressed. It had been suggested that Stoneley had misappropriated mess funds and the like. It was also suggested that the boy, desperate in his desire for more money, had sold military information to the agents of a foreign power, for whom this woman had acted as decoy. Meanwhile, neither his parents nor his brother officers would say a word: so far there had been a most determined loyal conspiracy of silence. Sooner or later, it would have to be broken, and so Kinney was trying to break it in favour of the *Tribune*, the *Sunday Courier*, and himself. The parents must be made to realise that he would handle it sensitively and reverently, that it was better that they should confide in him than let the full story become the prey of some dirty stunt journalist. Kinney did not consider himself a stunt journalist, and never hesitated to condemn the whole breed, fellows who went out after scandals and sensations and handed them over to their readers smoking-hot in the *Sunday Press*, without a thought of the nation's welfare, without a breath of moral indignation. There could be little doubt that that letter had been written by Stoneley to his parents, and contained a full account of the events that had driven him to suicide. Red House, Hatch Brow, held the secret, and this evening, with any luck, Kinney would learn what it was. He did not expect anything very sensational, but any exclusive facts would give him the excuse he needed. And the story was a good little story; it had all the right elements in it, the good-looking boy, the mysterious beautiful

woman, the wild nights at the flat, the last fatal scene, the subsequent revelations and the moral of it all; it was as neat as you please.

Meanwhile, he had to get there. With some difficulty he managed to make out the time, for there was now a steamy twilight inside the car: nearly six o'clock. He tapped on the glass between himself and the driver, and the car gave a mournful screech and then stopped. The driver made a little opening in the partition and put one eye and his nose in it.

"Do you happen to know where we are?" Kinney demanded severely.

"Two miles from Northdean, I make it," replied the driver.

"And then we've got to find Hatch Brow and then the house itself, Red House."

"That's right," said the driver cheerfully.

"Well, we don't want to be all night about it."

"I don't. But I told you it was a tidy journey. When I get into Northdean, I'll ask. There's no harm in asking, is there?"

Kinney did not reply to this idiotic question. "Get on with it then," he grunted.

There may not have been any harm in the driver's asking, but very soon there did not seem to be much good either. For the next twenty-five minutes the car seemed to spend more time anchored to the side of some pointing or chin-scratching rustic than it did going anywhere. They would be directed up narrow and muddy lanes, only to find at the end of them that they must turn round and begin all over again. The constant stopping and starting got on

Kinney's nerves. He cursed the rotten old car and its driver and the whole melancholy maze of a countryside they were in, and at last, when they stopped outside a large public house at a cross-roads, he jumped out, waved the driver contemptuously aside, and hobbled across to the Bar Parlour. He was stiff and cold, and could do with a drink.

After he had ordered a double whisky, he enquired about Red House, Hatch Brow. The only person who knew where it was, a young man with a tweed cap at the back of his head, added: "Take you there for ten bob, if you like. Got a car outside."

They struck a bargain at once. Kinney paid off the monster outside, returned to have another double whisky, then accompanied the young man with the cap. After many twistings and turnings in the gathering dusk, with each new prospect more melancholy than the last, they arrived at a damp little hill that seemed to be at the end of the world. On top of this hill was a square box of bricks: Red House. Kinney decided at once that it would be easy to find a picturesque phrase or two for it. He was feeling much better now, far more confident. The whisky had helped.

"How long you going to be?" the young man asked.

"I don't know. Might be ten minutes, might be an hour, might be all night. You know who lives here?"

"Yes, Father and mother of that chap that shot himself in London."

"That's it. And now I'll tell you who I am. I'm

Hal Kinney of the *Daily Tribune* and *Sunday Courier*."

The young man was impressed. "Thought I'd seen your face. I've read your writings many times."

Kinney was pleased. "Listen. Hang on as long as you can. I shall want somebody to take me back to civilisation—and the minute I'm through here too—and you might as well have the job. Wait here half an hour. If I'm not out then, go down to that pub at the corner at the bottom, and wait there another half hour. If I'm not out by then, come back and let me know you're here. That all right? Well, here's a pound to be going on with."

He strode up to the front door of the forlorn house and rang the bell like one who had been expected there for weeks. He was Hal Kinney, and he had brought the eyes and ears of the world with him.

## 3

Mr. Stoneley was not in at the moment, but he could see Mrs. Stoneley. He was shown into an old-fashioned and not very comfortable drawing-room. Evidently the Stoneleys were badly off, these days. Too many signs of wear and tear about for prosperity. He decided to call the dismal hole "a simple dignified English home."

Mrs. Stoneley was a thin fluttering creature, very spectral in her black. Before he had finished explaining who he was and why it would be better for

her to make a full statement to him, a sensitive and sympathetic listener, only too anxious to save other parents from such tragedies, he had decided shrewdly that though she had felt the loss of her son very deeply and really was reluctant to talk about him to a newspaper man, she could not help being flattered by these attentions from the Press, and in her heart of hearts wanted to talk on and on about the boy. A familiar type.

She brought her bony hands together and pressed them hard. "Yes, I do see what you mean, Mr. Kinney," she began, peeping at him out of her faded blue eyes. "But it's terribly difficult." Her voice trailed away. "Really . . . terribly difficult."

"I'm sure it is," he told her, in his deepest richest baritone. "You do understand that I sympathise with you."

"Yes, yes . . . of course. I'm sure everybody's been most kind to us . . . in our trouble."

"And you can understand," he went on, warming to the work, "that any mere peeping and prying into somebody's private life—particularly in a sad case of this kind—is most repugnant to me. My friend, the editor of the *Daily Tribune*, would not have suggested my coming to see you if he hadn't felt—as I feel—that it is in the best interests of the public, of fathers and mothers everywhere, that your unfortunate son's story—the full story—should be known—and of course sympathetically handled."

Her eyes filled with tears. "I'm sure if people knew *everything*," she faltered.

"Exactly, Mrs. Stoneley. To know all is to forgive all." He announced this grand truth very

quietly, and now he paused and looked at her in the way in which he hoped bereaved and tearful mothers liked to be looked at. So far, so good. Unfortunately this fruitful silence was ruined by the sound of a door being banged. There were heavy footfalls outside. This must be Stoneley, and Kinney took an instant dislike to the noises the man made.

Mrs. Stoneley began to flutter again. "Mr. Stoneley's here," she said quickly, and flashed at her visitor a glance of watery apprehension.

Kinney rose, summoned all his resources, braced himself for the encounter. A solid chunk of a man, with a square brown face and a moustache closely clipped to show a very grim mouth, stalked into the room. Physically he looked formidable enough, yet he had the air of a man who had lost something precious and knew that he would never find it again. Hal Kinney's heart was ready to go out to him. Harold Wentworth Kinney, the little anxious fellow inside, did not like the look of the chap.

"Allan, dear," Mrs. Stoneley began nervously, "this is Mr.—er—Mr. Kinney—who's come to see us—about Hugh—"

"Hal Kinney of the *Daily Tribune* and the *Sunday Courier*."

Mr. Stoneley said nothing. What he did was to swing round, march to the door and open it wide.

"I can quite understand, Mr. Stoneley," Kinney continued smoothly, "that you must be reluctant to discuss—"

"Get out."

Kinney wondered if he had actually heard these two short words spoken, or rather barked at him,

or whether it was merely the look on the man's face.

"I appreciate your feelings. Only public duty would make me intrude—"

"Get out."

This time there could be no mistake. It was frightening. But it was also humiliating, and Kinney remembered who he was and called outraged dignity to his aid. "You're not talking to some local reporter now, Mr. Stoneley. What I want—"

The other cut him short. "All I want is to be left alone. This is my house and I don't choose to have you inside it. So get out."

"Do you realise—"

Stoneley stepped forward. His heavy face now looked whitish, his eyes glared, and he seemed so menacing, so near to being a dangerous lunatic, that Kinney, though not easily intimidated by people of this sort, involuntarily retreated a pace or two.

"Allan dear," his wife fluttered.

One glance silenced her. Now it was Kinney's turn again. Stoneley's face achieved some ghastly thing between a grimace and a grin. He suddenly became communicative. "I never liked your gutter Press. I always thought it silly, dirty, irresponsible, and dangerous. Now I know what it can do. You people don't seem to have many ordinary feelings, but I take it you can still feel with your backsides. Well, if you don't go *now*, I'm going to kick you out, and that's not a figure of speech, for I'm really going to kick you out—and kick you hard. And after I've had the pleasure of booting you, you can take what action you like, I don't mind."

"This isn't India," said Kinney, not without dignity. He nodded to Mrs. Stoneley, brushed past the heavily-breathing figure of her husband, and found his way out into an evening that was grey but luminous, very cool and fresh, and not free from a mild irony of its own.

"And how did you get on in there?" the young man in the waiting car enquired, cheerfully.

## 4

"No, I'm damned if I'm going back to town in a slow train that gets in at two in the morning." Still smarting, left in the air with nothing for Shuckleworth, and sorely in need of some dinner and comfort, Kinney was ready to snarl at anything, not least at the fantastic train service in this remote region.

"It's all you'll get," said the young man, whose obtuse cheerfulness was beginning to annoy his companion.

"Then I won't get it," he snapped. "Look here, where are you going to to-night?"

"Where I came from this morning. Utterton."

"Where's Utterton, and what is it?"

"It's a town about twelve miles away, full of coal dust and every kind of stink and notice boards saying *Danger! No Smoking! Keep away!* That's Utterton."

"Why all the notice boards?" Kinney enquired peevishly, as if these too had been sent to try him.

"Because they make a lot of explosive stuff there."

One cigarette in the wrong place,” the young man went on happily, “and up goes the ruddy show. Nice little hole, Utterton.”

“Sounds like it. Well, can I get a decent dinner and a bed there?”

“They’ll give you steak and chips and a piece of apple pie and cheese at the ‘Station Arms.’ And the beds are all right.”

“That’ll do then,” said Kinney wearily. “Utterton it is.”

At the end of those twelve miles, like a very ugly toy on the end of a very long wet piece of string, was Utterton. It was exactly what the young man had led him to believe, and Kinney, who did not like small industrial towns, stared at it gloomily. Apart from the fact that he himself was in it, there seemed no good reason why it should not be blown up as soon as possible. And the “Station Arms” was —well, the “Station Arms.” In his earlier days, Kinney had gobbled and scribbled and tippled in hundreds of them, and though there were times when he could be sentimental about his earlier days, when he looked again upon a “Station Arms,” as he did now, his eyes were not bright with unshed tears.

There were three men in the Coffee Room. Two of them, dining together and making a good deal of noise, were obviously commercial travellers. The other fellow looked as if he had come into Utterton to commit suicide and was now occupied with his last and worst meal on earth. There was a ferocious draught from underneath the door. The waiter had a cold. There were steak and chips and plenty of

cheese, but not apple pie, only tinned peaches and custard. (Utterton likes a bit of custard.) It was all very melancholy until there bounced in a very brisk young man with rimless spectacles and a long nose. "Evening, George," he shouted to the waiter. "Evening, gentlemen," he shouted to the room. Then he looked hard at Kinney.

"Excuse me," he began, with no bounce at all, "but aren't you Mr. Kinney?" And there was deference in his glance.

"Yes, my name's Kinney."

"I thought so. You don't know me, but I know you. I heard you speak at the last annual dinner of our Provident Association. I went up to London specially for it."

"Oh—you're a journalist?"

"Think I am," said the young man proudly. "And among other things I'm local correspondent of the *Tribune*. My name's Chanton," And as if to prove it, he produced a visiting card and put it down on the table in front of Kinney, who found himself being revived a little by this young man's obvious respect.

"Eating here? Sit down and join me."

"Thanks very much, Mr. Kinney."

"Have a drink."

"Well, thanks very much. But I ought to have said that first, Mr. Kinney—"

"Being local correspondent, eh?"

"That's right," and Chanton laughed. His face glistened with gratification. Here he was, sitting at the same table, joking and laughing and about to be drinking with the great Hal Kinney.

Kinney was equally pleased, being glad to be rid of his own company. He had nothing to give Shuckleworth. The Stoneley story was a wash-out, and he could not see the ghost of a big feature story in this dreary part of the world. After dinner he would have to ring up Shuckleworth to tell him so. That would be humiliating. And it had been humiliating to crawl out of Stoneley's house like that. The whole damned day had been humiliating. So to Kinney the arrival of the eager and respectful Chanton, in whose world he was one of the demigods, was a piece of luck. He sunned himself in Chanton's admiring gaze. He felt the great journalist again. He would show them. Meanwhile, he paraded himself gloriously before this young man.

After all, the two of them belonged to the same trade, so talk was easy and happy between them. Kinney talked London journalistic shop, and then Chanton, who did not need much encouragement, talked local shop. He did not actually live in Utterton, but he knew a good deal about the place, and gave Kinney a fairly lively account of its borough politics. It was some piece of borough council business—Kinney never knew exactly what, and did not care—that had brought Chanton into Utterton that afternoon and was still keeping him there, for later he had to see Councillor Somebody-or-other. They settled down to whiskies in the Smoke Room, and Kinney let his companion do most of the talking, in the hope that these odd items of local news and gossip might suggest an idea to him for a news story or feature article. Several times he reminded himself that he had not rung up

Shuckleworth yet, but each time he had an excuse to keep away from the telephone.

At ten o'clock, Chanton announced that he must "nip round" and see his councillor. He promised to return as soon as he could. Kinney was not left in solitude, however, for by this time there were several fellows snugly settled in the Smoke Room, and Kinney, who had had a good many whiskies since the evening began, was ready to talk or listen to almost anybody. He was now in the pleasant stage at which all the harsher realities are banished from the mind, which begins to perceive goodness and beauty all round it. He himself, it seemed, was a figure of power. At any moment, something wonderful might happen. He was ready to write a great Hal Kinney story.

They heard a fire engine go clanging past. Everybody went to the front door. There was nothing in the sky to tell them where the fire was.

"False alarm, I'll bet," said one of them.

"Hope so," said another, a local man.

"I don't. Like to see a fire."

"Not in this town. Too dangerous. That's why they're always on the jump. One of the best fire brigades in England, that little lot you just heard. Notice the speed it went, passing the hotel. Which way did it go?" he asked one of the men lounging against the wall.

"Down by the canal."

"You hear that. Down by the canal. That's where the doings are."

"Explosive stuff, eh?" said Kinney, remembering what the young man in the car had told him.

“That’s it. My God, d’you realise, gen’l’men, there’s stuff down there that would blow half this town to hell and out of it. There is. I’m not joking.”

“Better get into the cellar, quick,” cried one of the commercial travellers, laughing.

“All right, you can laugh. But let me tell you it wouldn’t be funny. A gasometer going up would be a picnic compared with what could happen here. You remember what happened in Germany not long since? This would be as bad, if not worse. It wouldn’t need a fire—a few good sparks could do it—and in about half a minute Utterton would look like Vimy Ridge, only we wouldn’t know it because we’d be splashed against the wall.”

For a moment or two, everybody was silent. During that silence Kinney felt an odd spasm of fear. Supposing—but then he waved the thought away. These things simply didn’t happen—not to him.

“Well,” said the commercial traveller, with a mechanical rusty laugh, “if there is a fire, I’m not going to put it out. So what about having another drink while we’ve still a chance?”

They went indoors, so many solid ripe men of the world. The telephone bell was ringing. The call was for Kinney. His young friend, Chanton, was at the other end. “Listen, Mr. Kinney. There’s a good story here. I don’t know if it’s big enough for you, but it seems to me a very good story. You don’t mind me ringing you up.”

“Not a bit,” Kinney told him. “What is it?”

"I'm at the A.C.P. place—Associated Coal Products—where they're making a sort of petrol out of coal. Coaleen, they call it. Well, they must have had a short in the wires or something. Anyhow, a fire started, and if a young fellow who's working here hadn't instantly set about it with an axe, their big storage tank of Coaleen would have gone up in the air and God knows what would have happened then. We'd have all gone with it. Yes, honestly. The place next door is a damned sight more explosive than this, and the whole thing would have gone up, the town as well. Honestly, we're all lucky to be alive. If it hadn't been for this chap, we wouldn't be. He's burnt his arm a bit. Oh—and he's a reader of the *Tribune*—yes, a registered reader. He's just told me so. I think it's a grand story."

"It could be," said Kinney slowly. He was thinking hard. "Here, I'm coming down. Where is this chap?"

"He's with me here, in a sort of little office at the entrance to the A.C.P. works. Down by the canal, only about a half a mile away."

"I'll be there as soon as I can. Get me all the facts, Chanton. There might be something good in this. I'll see you don't lose anything by it."

It was not until he had rung off that he felt anything more than the interest any good journalist has in a possible news story. Then suddenly he was swept by excitement, almost choked by it. He felt inspired. It was a great idea, with possibilities that made the Stoneley story look merely a cheap bit of scandal. It was just what he wanted. It was just what the *Tribune* and the *Sunday Courier* wanted.

too. If Shuckleworth couldn't see that, then he would go straight to the proprietor and put the idea to him, shout it at him. There was no taxi to be seen outside the hotel, but there was a garage still open across the road, and he hurried over and demanded a car. No time to be lost. Jolting over the cobblestones, he turned his idea this way and that and could find no flaw in it. A reader of the *Daily Tribune*, and no mistake about that, because he was registered; one of their one and a half million readers; just an ordinary young workman in a dull little town; but a hero, who had instantly risked certain and terrible death, who had saved a thousand, perhaps ten thousand lives, crowds of women and children; a hero, like the boys who died for us on Flanders fields; one of the wonderful old breed. Yes, that was it—Wonder Hero. He saw the great splash headline. The *Tribune's* national figure, to be used in fifty different ways. What a stunt! What a story! What a show! What a marvellous idea! And as he said these things to himself in the car, Kinney did not hold in his mind a vision of the young man himself or the lives he may have saved. He saw his wife and Shuckleworth and that unpleasant fellow Stoneley and a hundred others who looked at him in the wrong way and did not seem to understand what sort of man he was, and he swept them together into a vague trembling audience, and told them that he would show them something now, he would show them. He was inspired, a man of power, and nearly drunk.

Just outside the A.C.P. building were two fire engines, several policemen, and a small crowd of people who would rather risk being blown up than miss anything. Kinney said "Press" and looked so important that he was at once allowed to go into the little hut inside the yard. There he found Chanton, a police sergeant, a doctor, two or three nondescript fellows, and the hero himself, who had just had his burned arm dressed. Kinney was relieved to discover that the hero was a sturdy, pleasant-looking young man with sandy hair and clear eyes, a good type. His name, it appeared, was Charles Habble. He was evidently a very modest fellow, for now he was dreadfully embarrassed. Kinney was delighted: this was all as it should be.

"Now, Mr. Habble," he began. "I'm told you're a regular reader of the *Daily Tribune*. Well, if you are, you ought to know my name. I'm Hal Kinney."

Kinney could have asked for nothing better than the glance of mixed awe and bewilderment that Habble now gave him. Here, it was obvious, was a member of his great public. The young man, overwhelmed, looked away, mumbled a reply, and shifted uneasily in his chair; a picture of true modesty; one of the good old breed. Kinney was enraptured. If he himself had invented the man, he could not have improved upon this Charles Habble.

"And first I want to shake you by the hand," he continued in his grandest manner. "It's an honour.

You're a hero, Mr. Habble, a true hero."

Habble seemed to be in danger of choking, in his deep embarrassment. He looked quickly here and there, anywhere but at Kinney, as if searching for some possible way of escape.

"I know how you feel," said Kinney, as if he too had at some time or other been another such modest hero. "It does you credit. But it's no use, Mr. Habble. The world has got to learn what you did to-night."

"It wasn't anything," the young man gasped miserably.

"I know what it was," Kinney told him, not without a certain severity. This modesty could be carried too far. "And the whole of England will know tomorrow. You're going on the front page of the *Tribune*." He turned to the admiring Chanton. "What about photographs?"

"I've got a chap coming along."

"Good. No, there's no escape, Mr. Habble. I know you think you only did your duty and don't want any fuss, but you'll have to go through with it now. You can't save a whole town from destruction," he observed, with magnificent emphasis, "and hope to be unnoticed. You've done your duty. Now I must do mine. And mine is to make every reader of the *Daily Tribune* and the *Sunday Courier* aware of the great and solemn fact that England can still produce heroes, and that one of them is Charles Habble of Utterton."

Unfortunately, the doctor, who had been tidying up, chose this moment to step forward and remark, rather dryly: "Two more good applications of that

oil, young fellow, and your arm will be all right. In the meantime, move it as little as possible. You'd better get to bed as soon as possible, and take two of these." He handed him a tiny cardboard box. "They'll help to make you sleep."

When the doctor had hustled out, Kinney took charge of the situation again, but spoke less flamboyantly. "Now listen to me, Mr. Habble. I want to give a full account of your exploit to the *Tribune* to-night, so that we can print it for to-morrow's paper. You're an injured man, you're tired, and you want to get to bed."

Habble found his tongue. "Well, I don't know if I can leave yet."

"Leave?"

"Yes. You see, I'm working on the night turn here this week, and I don't knock off till half-past seven."

This was good. This was the stuff. Kinney could see himself making a grand paragraph in his story out of this. The man had saved the whole works, saved the town, and injured himself too, and yet did not know whether he could go home, simply because he had not had official leave granted him. "Of course you can go, if you want to," he said, smiling. "But that's not the point. The point is, if I'm to get the full story through in time, you'll have to co-operate with us a little. I shall want to know more about you and so forth. We must have some photographs."

"What's all this nonsense about?"

At the sound of this new voice, the hero jumped. Kinney turned round. Two men had just entered,

and obviously they were persons in authority. The one who had spoken was a sharp-featured youngish fellow, who appeared to be in a very bad temper. The other was middle-aged, a plump man with a cavalry moustache and a vague air of opulence.

"Good evening, Mr. Oglesby," said Chanton uncomfortably. "This is Mr. Hal Kinney. You know, he's the chief feature writer on the *Tribune*."

"And I propose to write something—a good deal, in fact—about this business here to-night. Hence," Kinney added, looking Oglesby, whoever he was, full in the face, "this nonsense you were enquiring about."

"Mr. Oglesby," said Chanton hastily, "is the works manager here."

"And Mr. Oglesby," said that gentleman, with unpleasant emphasis, "wants to get on with his work and doesn't see why the place should be cluttered up with newspaper men. Now then, Habble, I want to talk to you."

Now Kinney had had a long day, during which several people, with the monstrous Stoneley at their head, had managed to snub him or at least not extend to him the respect he thought his due. At last, here he was, with a wonderful story and feeling at the top of his form. No works manager on earth could brush him aside at this hour. He could be unpleasant too.

"Just a minute, Mr. Oglesby—" he began.

"Is it necessary?"

"Yes, strictly necessary. As I told you, I propose to make a big splash about this business, if only because your employee here, Mr. Habble, seems to

me to have behaved like a hero. He did a wonderfully courageous thing."

Oglesby stared at him. "He did the only possible thing under the circumstances, like a sensible fellow. But what interests me is how the circumstances arose. That's what is important. Not this bunkum about heroes."

"It doesn't look bunkum to me. And the British public won't think it bunkum either, my dear sir."

"Damn the British public—if you mean the asses who believe what you fellows tell them."

"Better not take that line with me," said Kinney sharply. "Other people in your position have tried it before and have found it didn't pay. It seems to me that some very awkward questions could be asked about this business here. And we're in a position to ask them and keep on asking them until everybody wants to know, too. If you propose to make things awkward for me, all right. But I warn you. I'm on to this thing now, with two big newspapers behind me, and I'll make things damned awkward for you and your *Coaleen* and the whole concern. You think you're doing your duty. Well, I'm doing mine."

Oglesby was furious. "Why can't you leave us alone? Go and write your rubbish about something else. And if Habble here starts talking nonsense to you, I warn him now he'll lose his job. I'm not sure he oughtn't to lose it anyhow."

Kinney laughed. "It doesn't matter tuppence to him now whether he loses his job or not." At this point, the hero himself tried to say something, but Kinney silenced him. "I can put him where he

wouldn't take *your* job if it was offered to him. Yes I can—and, by God!—I will. Chanton, go and get through to Shuckleworth. Tell him what's happened here and my idea for the feature story, and tell him I'll be through to him myself in half an hour or so."

"Right you are, Mr. Kinney." And he hurried out.

"Well, I'm busy," said Oglesby. "And this office happens to be private property—"

"Yes, but you and it and a lot of other things are about to become public property," Kinney retorted.

"Just a minute, Oglesby," said the plump man, speaking for the first time. "I understand what you feel, but we simply can't afford to do it. My name is Merson," he went on, addressing Kinney, "and I'm one of the directors of A.C.P. I know your name well, Mr. Kinney—often read your articles—and you can rest assured we'll give you all reasonable assistance. You must realise that Mr. Oglesby is rather on edge. He feels the responsibility. Perhaps you and I could have a little talk. I'll show you anything you want to see, tell you anything you want to know."

"Thanks. It's the only sensible thing to do. This story could easily be wonderful publicity—of the right kind—for your concern, and it could equally easily be wonderful publicity—of the wrong kind."

"Exactly. I appreciate that, Mr. Kinney. And you understand we're a new British combine, out to make new products—especially this *Coaleen*—of great importance to British industry. Now perhaps

you'd like me to show you exactly what happened, and to tell you one or two things."

"Just what I wanted," cried Kinney heartily. Then he turned to Habble. "Stay here until I come back. And don't bother your head about losing your job. You're a made man now. I'll see to that."

## 6

Half an hour later, Kinney was talking to Shuckleworth on the telephone: ". . . Well, my idea is for us to make a figure out of him. . . . Yes, that's it. . . . Oh, all kinds of uses. . . . Yes, something like that. . . . And political. . . . And, of course, for advertising. . . . No, I don't suppose we can keep it up very long, but what does that matter? . . . Yes, the minute it's cold, we can drop the whole thing. . . . Why should it? Think of the advertising and publicity value. And we get up a fund for him. . . . Well, you'll see what the Chief says. But I'm certain he'll like the idea. Anyhow, I shall bring Habble up with me to-morrow. . . . Oh, he seems a decent docile little fellow. . . . No, no trouble at all. . . . What? Oh—to the News—yes. Good night. Hello, is that News? Oh—is that you, Tom? . . . Can you? Good! . . . Yes, splash. . . . Ready? . . . right—*Wonder Hero*—"

## CHAPTER THREE

### THIS IS LONDON

#### 1

At eleven o'clock next morning, Charlie Habble was sitting opposite Mr. Kinney in a first-class carriage on the London express. He felt very queer. He was wearing his best suit, best shirt and tie, best boots, and was very spruce. His bad arm was now in a black silk sling. He looked all right, much better than he did in those two photographs of him in this morning's *Daily Tribune*. But he felt very queer, and rather frightened. Last night's funny business had been bad enough, but it had been all mixed up with the darkness, like a dream, and so it did not seem to matter very much. But now it was daylight, the sun was shining, and instead of settling down into the ordinary run, things had taken a queerer turn. Here he was, on a Wednesday morning, going up to London, where he had only been once before, to the Cup Final three years ago. There on the opposite seat, not taking much notice of him now, was Mr. Kinney, the great Mr. Kinney, smoking a cigar and looking through one paper after another. And in one of those papers, the *Tribune*, were photographs of himself, and a long, excited piece all about him by Mr. Kinney. He was supposed to be a great hero, though he knew very

well he was nothing of the kind. But there it was, in big print, in the *Tribune*. And thousands and thousands of people, all over the place, must have read about him this morning.

Mrs. Fawset, his landlady, had been one of them. She had immediately cried. Then when she noticed his arm, she had cried again. When she learned he was going to London, she had cried again, and had had a final cry when he actually set off. She was not as a rule a crying woman, but this occasion had been too much for her, and she had had a thoroughly wet and enjoyable morning. She was probably going round Duck Street now, showing everybody the paper.

Charlie could not forget that paper. It made him feel excited, but it also made him feel ashamed. There was one Charlie Habble sitting here, decently dressed in a dark blue suit; but there was another Charlie Habble in the paper, right on the front page, as if he was standing naked in a main street. A lot of people in the station had stared at him, and two or three chaps had shouted "Good old Charlie!" Then, just as he sat down in the carriage, an oldish fellow, very nicely dressed and well spoken, had rushed in and shaken him by the hand, saying that he was a credit to his country. Charlie squirmed again at the thought of it. Was it going to be like that in London?

He hoped Mr. Kinney would begin talking, because he would like to try and explain what he felt about all this. They had the carriage to themselves. For the first hour or so, however, Mr. Kinney said nothing, but went through paper after paper, and

Charlie smoked a cigarette or two and watched the bright fields rush up to the window and then hurry away. There were plenty of papers for him to read, but he left them alone. Somehow he did not fancy newspapers this morning. Finally Mr. Kinney threw aside his last paper, looked across at Charlie, smiled benevolently, and said: "Well, what does it feel like to be famous all of a sudden?"

"Now you're asking me something, Mr. Kinney," replied Charlie, friendly, but still respectful. "But I'm not famous."

"Getting on that way. A lot of people read about you this morning. And we haven't done with you yet. You wait."

"All right, Mr. Kinney. But what are you going to do with me?"

"I'm not quite sure yet, Hibble. Let you enjoy yourself, I suppose."

"No making speeches or anything of that sort, I hope," said Charlie, looking apprehensive.

"Not if you don't want to. Don't worry. You'll be given the time of your life. Been to London before?"

"Only once, for the Cup Final, three years since. I didn't see much of it, and what I did see I didn't care for. Had a poor meal, too, in one of these tea-shops. Rissoles we had, I remember, and they tasted to me a bit off."

"No rissoles this time, my boy."

"I'll see to that, Mr. Kinney. But where am I going when I get to London, that's what I want to know?"

"I'll tell you where you're going," said Kinney

expansively. "First, you're coming with me to the *Tribune* office, to meet the editor. You may have another photograph or two taken there, and have to answer a few more questions."

"Not about last night, I hope."

"No, we've done with that. They'll probably ask you how long you've been reading the *Tribune*, how you like it—you have to like it, y'know, Habble."

"That's all right. I need tell no lies on that score."

"They may ask you what you think about the state of the country or the Government, and so on."

"And they'll tell me what to say, eh?"

"Well, no doubt they'll help you, if you find it hard to reply. And then there may be more personal questions. One of our bright young women may be put on to you, to ask you a few things."

This prospect did not please Charlie. "I hope not."

"Why? Don't you like bright young women? By the way, we ought to know more about this. Have you got a girl? We must know about that."

"No, I can't say that I have," Charlie replied cautiously, rather as if he might turn out his pockets and come upon an odd girl there he had overlooked. "No, I haven't got a girl. As a matter of fact, the girl I was walking out with for some time got married last Saturday."

"And she's probably sorry now. She jilted you, eh? Threw you over?"

"No, I can't say she did," he said slowly, still in that cautious tone which he appeared to keep specially for this topic. "We'd both cooled off a bit. I'd moved to another town—for she didn't live

in Utterton—and she'd got this chap on the side, he'd been after her for some time. She'd rather have had me, you know, and I'm not boasting neither. I know she would. But I wasn't there—and cooling off—and this other chap *was* there—so she fixed herself up."

"And now you've got nobody?"

"That's right. Completely on my own."

"Do you like that?"

"Can't say that I do, Mr. Kinney. If I could find the right one, I'd like to be married. You can have a bit too much of your own company, specially at night. And then look at this sort of job—me going up to London. Well, I'd be better off if I'd a girl to go with me, so we could talk things over quietly, y' know, whenever we felt like it. I don't know what's going to happen to me when you get me to London, but I fancy it will be a bit of a lonely business."

"Plenty of young women in town to take your pick from," Kinney told him.

"I know. But they wouldn't be my style. Too lah-di-dah altogether for me."

"Now look here, Habble. I'm talking as a friend now. It's all very well being modest—I've praised you for it already—but don't overdo it. You *are* somebody now, and don't let anybody forget it."

"I always was somebody," Charlie declared sturdily. "And if you think I go about fancying everybody's better than I am, Mr. Kinney, you've got me wrong. I've never been anybody's door-mat, and I'm not going to start now. That's not what I mean at all. But you see, these people in London live in one kind of way—the way you do yourself,

Mr. Kinney—and I live in another kind of way, and you can't begin mixing 'em."

"We'll see. Well, what about a quick drink and then some lunch?"

"Thanks very much."

"You needn't thank me. It'll all go down on my expense account to the paper. So we might as well do ourselves as well as we can, which won't be very well, on this train."

It seemed to Charlie that they did themselves very well indeed. He had a gin-and-bitters, his first, before lunch, though he did not care for it very much. Then, during lunch, Mr. Kinney ordered a bottle of red wine, which Charlie helped him to finish. He did not like the taste of it very much, too sour, and it made him feel rather queer and sleepy, but it was all very grand. There was a lot of food, and not bad either, most of it, though Mr. Kinney grumbled all the time. When they had finished eating, they had coffee without any milk in it, very bitter stuff, and some brandy that made you feel very cosy inside with every sip of it. At the end, Charlie felt fairly comfortable and quite cheerful, but not quite on the spot, as if everything was happening at a distance. It was all very queer, but he no longer felt frightened. It was happening, and the only thing to do was to lean back and let it happen. Here, darkening the windows, was St. Pancras Station. Well, there was nothing to be done about it. All right—St. Pancras Station. Crowds of Londoners. London all round him, miles and miles of it, and the only bit he remembered was the Strand. Well, what next? That was the only thing

to do—to sit back and say, "What next?" He had stopped being Charlie Habble, the real one, and had turned into the impossible chap they were ready to write long pieces about in the papers. He didn't ask for it All right then.

## 2

"All right, Sound?"

"O K."

"All right, Jim?"

"All right."

"Now don't begin until you see that red light come on. And look at one another, don't look at the camera. And don't move out of your chalk lines. All right, boys. Turn 'em over. Quiet, everybody."

In the silence that followed, whatever had to be turned over could be heard turning over. The red light, like a single glaring eye, issued its command.

On Mr. Shuckleworth's large but very flat face there appeared a smile that had been fresh ten minutes ago, when they first rehearsed this little scene for the film sound news, but now was beginning to crack and look stale. "Charles Habble," he said once more, "as a little mark of the *Daily Tribune's* appreciation of your devotion to duty, promptness and courage in saving as you did your works and probably the whole town of Utterton from a terrible disaster, I am presenting you—"

"Just a minute," roared a despairing voice.

"What is it?" groaned the man in charge.

"Sound gone wrong."

"Right, boys. Save 'em."

The smile vanished from Mr. Shuckleworth's face as the big lights went out. He looked cross now and said that it wouldn't do, really it wouldn't do at all. Charlie felt that it wouldn't do, but did not dare to say so. It had been bad enough going to the *Tribune* office and having his hand shaken by the editor, Mr. Shuckleworth; but this film sound news business was a lot worse. He had been very nervous at first, and now, after a quarter of an hour of starting and stopping he was damp everywhere but inside his mouth, which was as dry as an old bone. He had begun sweating out of sheer apprehension, and then the huge lights had been switched on and he had sweated more than ever. Now a little man suddenly rushed forward and dabbed a huge powder-puff in his face.

"Here," shouted Charlie, half choking, "what's the idea?"

"'S'all ri', ol' man," replied the powderer, adding a few finishing touches. "Your face is shining, see? Can't have your face shining. 'S'all ri'."

Charlie did not think it was all right. The powder had a sickly sweet smell. It made him feel a fool. His face was no longer damp, but it felt very stiff and heavy, like a mask.

They started all over again, going through the same old palaver. Charlie had entered the studio with a very lively curiosity about what happened inside it, but this curiosity had been more than satisfied.

"—I am presenting you," said Mr. Shuckleworth,

with the mere ghost of a smile now, "with this cheque for five hundred pounds."

"Thank you, Mr. Shuckleworth," Charlie replied, according to plan. His voice came out all wrong. "I only did my duty, but I'm very grateful to the *Daily Tribune*." Which was true enough. Five hundred pounds! He had not really taken in this stupendous fact yet; and would not have been greatly surprised if, once they had got through this film business, Mr. Shuckleworth snatched the cheque—and the dream of five hundred pounds—away from him.

"You are, I understand," said Mr. Shuckleworth, carefully piecing together his smile, "a regular reader of the *Daily Tribune*."

"All right," roared the man in charge, who kept his hat on to let everybody know who he was. "Cut. No, don't move, you two. Now then, Jim."

Jim began wheeling the gigantic camera closer to his two victims, whose feet were imprisoned by chalk-marks on the floor. Charlie, whose face was beginning to feel damp again, took this opportunity of looking again at the paper he had been given, on which was typed, in capital letters, what he had to say. "Yes," he muttered anxiously, "I have been a regular reader of the *Daily Tribune* for many years. . . ." Oh, what a game! He looked up, and found that the little man with the big powder-puff was staring at him. In another minute he would be choking again with that stinking powder. He pretended to be very busy with his sheet of paper. "Yes," he read hoarsely, "I believe it has helped me to do my duty, whatever that might be, as a good

Englishman. I am sure all your other readers would say the same." Well, they might, thought Charlie, but that was no way to make him talk. He had a sudden vision of all the people he knew in Bendworth and Utterton sitting in the picture theatres, hearing this and seeing him, Charlie Habble, and it seemed as if he could hear them all guffawing. He squirmed.

"Here," he shouted, to his own astonishment as well as everybody else's. "Come on. Get on with it, can't you?"

They replied that they were getting on with it as quickly as they could, old man. Powder-puff stepped forward, but was checked by a ferocious scowl from Charlie. And now they had all shouted "All right" and "O.K." to one another, and were off again.

". . . a regular reader of the *Daily Tribune*," Mr. Shuckleworth repeated, with the remnant of a smile and in a voice that suggested extreme disgust.

"Yes," said Charlie hopelessly, "I have been a regular reader of the *Daily Tribune* for—er—a long—many years."

"Well," said Mr. Shuckleworth, about to be sick at any moment, "I hope our paper has been a help as well as a pleasure to you."

"That's right," said Charlie, who now felt, with a horrible sense of panic, that these were the only words he would ever be able to say again. "That's—Yes," and now he remembered, and they came with a rush, "I-believe-it-has-helped-me-to-do-my-duty—you know, whatever—my duty—as a good Englishman."

"Splendid!" said Mr. Shuckleworth grimly.

"Well, I hope—er—that as a guest of the *Daily Tribune*, you will now enjoy your first holiday in London."

"Thanks, Mr. Shuckleburr—er—" Charlie gabbled desperately, "I'm sure I shall."

And it was over. The boys were cutting it and saving 'em and shouting "O.K." to one another, as if they had all just arrived from Hollywood, and the man in charge, now removing his hat, was assuring Mr. Shuckleworth that, with any luck, the sequence ought to find its way into the last house programmes of some of the West End picture theatres that very night.

"Now," Mr. Shuckleworth began, after lightly mopping his face, "that's that. It's the first time I've ever done one of these damned things, and I hope it'll be the last."

"Same here," said Charlie sociably.

"I'm handing you over," said Mr. Shuckleworth, with a certain access of dignity, "to one of my young men, Hughson there. Just a minute, Hughson. He'll take you to your hotel, the New Cecil, and will see you're properly installed. And I want you to stay in for a few hours because we may want some more photographs and some interview stuff. Hughson, ring up the office when you get to the hotel, and then stay on the end of the line there until we've finished. You can hand that cheque to the hotel cashier if you like, Habble, and he can bank it for you. That's all."

"What about the other papers, Mr. Shuckleworth, and the agencies?" Hughson asked. "Are we letting them in on this?"

"Oh yes—they can take pictures and use the story," said Mr. Shuckleworth. "But it's our story. They don't get anything exclusive, you understand. Just what we care to give them—that's the line. By the way, Habble, do you drink?"

"Not much, Mr. Shuckleworth."

"Well, make it still less, if you can. Safer, much safer. Good afternoon."

Hughson, a thin brown youth with a puckered monkey face, watched his editor depart, winked at Charlie, then said with obvious burlesque: "Safer, much safer."

Charlie was far more at his ease with this chap than he had been with great men like Mr. Shuckleworth and Mr. Kinney. "Well," he said sensibly, "I see what he meant."

Hughson winked again. "So do I. But if it was me, I wouldn't be having any. I'd get tight now, and *stay* tight until the racket was over. Let's get out of this."

"What about my face? All this powder."

"Doesn't look as bad as it smells. You smell like the beauty chorus of a revue now appearing, without much success, at Stockton-on-Tees or Ashton-under-Lyme. Perhaps they can organise a wash here. They don't look it, but you never know."

They could and did, and Charlie left them with a face that shone with relief and hard, yellow soap. Hughson called a taxi. "Is that your bag?"

"All I've got," said Charlie.

"That's going to give them a surprise at the New Cecil. Do 'em good, too. What's inside? The old .

woollen night-shirt, carpet slippers, and a change of socks?"

"That's about it."

"Well, never mind. I expect you'll get a complete rig-out on the nod to-morrow, or publicity's not what it was. My advice is to dig into it with both hands. Loot the old town. Burn and sack."

When the taxi had taken them into a crimson, hooting jungle of buses, Hughson laid a hand on Charlie's arm, looked hard at him, and spoke in a confidential whisper. "I'm talking to you now not as a journalist—God help us all!—but as a human being, my mother's favourite child. And I want you to answer me not as a hero, a wonder hero, a saviour of thousands, an Englishman doing his duty, but as another human being, your father's joy. Did you really do anything very much up there in what's its-name—Utterton?"

"No," replied Charlie truthfully.

"I thought you couldn't have. Otherwise the old paper would be going to the dogs, just printing news. It's really something out of nothing, is it? Good. Then we haven't lost our old form."

This was bewildering, for here was a journalist quite different from Mr. Kinney or Mr. Shuckleworth. Obviously, one of those bright chaps who would say anything for tuppence. Charlie rather liked him, though. There was something droll about his young-old brown face. Charlie had met fellows like him before, with the same amusing monkey tricks with everything, for there is usually one in every factory and football team.

The taxi now swept round towards the entrance

of an enormous new building near a park. "The New Cecil," Hughson announced, waving a hand. "Your future home for the next week or two—perhaps for the next ten years, if you should start company promoting. London's latest luxury—or rather, super-de-luxe hotel. Not a bad little shack."

"Here, steady," cried Charlie, looking with dismay at the astonishing place. "I can't stay here."

"You can and you will. Nothing easier. It's all on the nod. They want publicity, and the old man's one of the directors."

"What old man?" asked Charlie.

"The proprietor of the *Daily Tribune* and the *Sunday Courier* and other newspapers and periodicals. He's a director of this cosy little nook, though I can't believe he was fool enough to put any money in it, because obviously it'll never pay."

"How much does it cost to stop in a place like this?"

"Couldn't say exactly. Doing it modestly, sleeping in a cupboard and not having a bath and so forth, probably about four guineas a day. But doing it in style—as you're going to do it, my friend—because I'll see to that—it might be anything from eight to ten guineas a day upward."

Charlie blew out his cheeks and then slowly shook his head as the breath left them. "It's out of all reason," he announced finally.

"Reason!" cried Hughson, as they stopped at the door. "Don't talk about reason here. This isn't your Little Puddlecombe. We don't go in for that sort of thing here. Our line is the sublime and the ridiculous. Look at these two fellows, dressed like

an archduke's major-domo. Look at those lights, all burning, although it's still broad daylight. Look at that door, so designed and built that not the least breath of air ever enters the lounge. Here you—take this gentleman's case, and wait for me."

## 3

Charlie had never seen anything like this place except in films, and not often in films. The carpet, which was a deep purple and went on for hundreds of yards, was inches thick. Somewhere a band was playing. There were a dozen men in purple and silver uniforms, and waiters in evening dress, page-boys, and saucy-looking girls in a fancy costume, who carried trays of papers and cigarettes. The chairs were so deep and soft that the people who sat down in them almost disappeared. The lighting was the cleverest he had ever seen, with not a lamp visible. Just having a look inside this place was as good as seeing a musical show at the theatre. Its one great drawback was that it was very stuffy, much too warm. Charlie felt he could hardly breathe. The only air to be had in there was so warmed up and scented and fourth-hand that your lungs found it useless. He had never been in so large and so high a room that seemed so suffocating. The very carpet threatened any minute to let you sink so far that you would be choked. There did not seem to be any windows, and once you were well inside the place, you could not tell by looking about you what time of day or night it might be. And all the men in

uniform and the waiters looked as if they had forgotten long ago how to tell day from night.

Hughson marched him up to a sort of large desk that was all glass and shining metal. Behind it sat a very glossy young man, who might have been made out of silk hats and American cloth.

"The manager," said Hughson grandly.

"I am very sorry, sir, but the manager is not in the building. He will not be back until six-thirty."

"The assistant manager, then."

"Certainly, sir. But may I ask—what name?"

"This is Mr. Charles Habble, the man who saved Utterton and half the Midlands—and the nicer half. I am Mr. Hughson of the *Daily Tribune*. The assistant manager at once, please."

They waited while the glossy young man telephoned. "Well, what do you think about this home from home?" Hughson asked. "Is it or is it not fit for heroes to live in?"

"It's no place for me," Charlie told him. "Why, it's ridiculous. I shan't know what to do with myself in a place like this. You might as well settle me into Buckingham Palace and have done with it."

"Buckingham Palace! My dear chap, there's no comparison. Staying in Buckingham Palace would be roughing it after this place. This is wonder super de luxe. Even the very air, you notice, is pre-digested. But don't stand any nonsense from it, remember that. Treat it like a mere dog. Here's the assistant manager, on the run. He's keen, you can see that—oh—keen. I was just saying," he added unblushingly, as the assistant manager came up, "that you were obviously keen."

"I am keen, very keen." And, smiling, looking at them very hard, making vague sounds of welcome, he gave them a keen hand-shake. He was a tall fellow with a very wide mouth and prematurely bald in front, so that he appeared to have a colossal forehead. He was dressed in various natty arrangements of black-and-white, and Charlie never remembered seeing anybody who looked quite so neat. Having shaken hands with them, he brought his own hands together with a sharp slap. "All arrangements have been made. We have a little suite on the second floor—one of our rose and grey Antoinette suites—for Mr. Habble, whom we are proud to have as one of our guests. I will show it to you myself. This way, gentlemen, please."

He led them to one of the lifts. "Notice our system of indicators. I tell you instantly where your lift is, and I never fail."

Charlie was a trifle puzzled by this last remark, for the man did not tell them where their lift was, but pointed to the indicator. It was only later that he realised that this was the assistant manager's way of talking, when he was at his keenest. He did not talk about the thing, he became the thing. Once they were in the lift, he became the lift. "Notice, please, I'm free from air pressure. I don't give you that sinking feeling. And I stop exactly at the floor you want, can't stop anywhere else." In the corridor on the second floor, he turned himself immediately into a system of light signals. "You don't hear me ringing and ringing all the time," he told them proudly. "You don't hear a sound from me. I do my work quietly, entirely with lights." But he was

at his best as a rose and grey Antoinette suite, as bedroom, sitting-room and bathroom. Charlie particularly admired him as a needle spray bath. His final and grandest transformation was into the telephoning service system. "You notice," he cried, pointing to his other self, "I'm a dial arrangement. You want the valet; all right, put me in there, take up my receiver, and merely ask. You want the shop—some studs, some flowers, a cigar, gloves, dress ties or socks—slip me round there, speak into my receiver, and there you are—at the shop. I don't take a second and I'm foolproof."

"What do I do to you if I want the exchange?" Hughson enquired.

"Twist me round there and I'm through to our switchboard. When you've finished, put me back—like that. Simple, isn't it? Well, Mr. Habble, we're delighted to see you here, and I hope we shall make you very comfortable. Our motto is 'Luxury and Service.'"

"A very good motto, too," said Hughson solemnly. "I've never had enough of either."

"All you've got to do is to ask," he told Charlie. Then turning to Hughson, he said in a lower and more business-like tone: "Our publicity man, Mr. Brooks, will be coming up soon. Good afternoon." And he left them at ease in the rose and grey Antoinette sitting-room, which was warm and airless and not unlike the inside of a chocolate-box.

Charlie looked about him. He was beginning to recover now. "Y'know," he remarked, "I'm not used to this sort of place at all."

"Of course you're not," replied Hughson cheer-

fully. "But then very few people are, only a few rich and dotty widows and some of the international crooks. But remember—all we've got to do is to ask. Let's start asking."

"What for?"

"Do you mean *Why?* or *For What?* Anyhow, it doesn't matter, we're going to ask for something. Tea, that's it. We'll have tea. Not one of your Utterton teas, you know, with roast pork and trifle, but a dainty afternoon tea. Habble, I'll dare you to telephone down for two of their dainty afternoon teas."

"That's all right, lad." Charlie grinned. "You've won."

"Call yourself a hero!"

"No, I don't," Charlie shouted. "And you won't either if you want to stop here in peace. Just drop it, see."

"Oh—sorry, Habble. I didn't realise you were so touchy about it. I thought you were taking it as a joke—like me. Best way to take it, you know. Get what you can out of it, and laugh at 'em. They don't really give a damn for you, and you shouldn't give a damn for them. It's all a game."

"I don't know about that. Look at Mr. Kinney."

"My God!—yes, look at him. You don't mean to say that windbag, that walking Christmas-card, has taken you in?"

"I shouldn't have been here if it hadn't been for him," said Charlie.

"Well, let's give the old tripe merchant credit for that. And, by the way, you've only got to repeat a little of my conversation to Shuckleworth or Kinney

to get me well and truly sacked from the *Tribune*."

"Go on with you," cried Charlie, beginning to look indignant. "Think I'd do a thing like that! What d'you take me for? Say what you like, as long as you don't start heroing me, that's all."

"Nobly spoken. Well, what I do say is—Two of your daintiest teas for two boys in Suite Twenty-three." And this was the form the order took when he telephoned it.

The tea was so elaborate that it needed two waiters to serve it. There were two kinds of toast, three kinds of bread and butter, four kinds of sandwiches, and five kinds of cake.

"Mind you, Habble," said Hughson, with his mouth full of sandwich, "this doesn't count as a meal. Oh dear no! The sort of people who stay in this hotel only have four meals—breakfast, lunch, dinner, and supper. This is simply one of the odds and ends, like the bread and butter they might have with their early morning tea, or the little something they might have to sustain them about eleven o'clock in the morning. Greedy pigs," he added, taking three more sandwiches and popping them all at once into his mouth.

"Well, I can do with over-eating for a bit," said Charlie. "I've gone hungry many a time. Like a lot more's doing now."

Hughson made a shushing noise. "You haven't got to say things like that in here. What do you think they keep all the daylight and fresh air out for? It's so that no whispers and rumours can get in. And I'll tell you frankly, I think you're a mistake. They'll regret taking you in."

"Course I'm a mistake," Charlie replied heartily.  
"It's silly me being in this place."

"I hope you don't think it's too good for you."

"Not I, except as it might be too good for anybody. It's not my style, that's all. And I don't believe it's yours either," he added shrewdly.

Hughson bit lovingly into a large sticky cake. "I'm at home anywhere, except in the *Tribune* office." He waved a hand. "A man of the world. I could order you a first-class dinner here. On the other hand, I could be happy eating fish and chips with you in what's-its-name—Utterton."

"Oh, could you? Well—on the other hand—I don't like fish and chips."

"You don't? I thought all you fellows liked fish and chips."

"I don't—for one. Never fancied 'em, and besides, they're too fattening. I like to keep in good shape," Charlie went on seriously.

"Oh—vanity, vanity!"

"Vanity nothing. But up to a year or two back, I was playing football."

"Do any boxing?"

"Not much," replied Charlie, pleased that the talk was taking a sensible turn. "But I can use 'em a bit."

"So could I once." Hughson marched to the telephone, switched the indicator to *Shop*, then said: "Is that the *Shop*? Good! This is Suite Twenty-three. We want a set of boxing-gloves. You haven't. Ridiculous! What do you think we stay in this hotel for? Kindly report this absence of boxing-gloves to the assistant manager." He swung

round, then danced forward with his left out stretched. Charlie, grinning, covered up, and for the next few minutes they sparred as best they could merely flicking one another with the backs of their fingers. The bout ended with the arrival of the waiter to remove the tea things. He was followed by Brooks, the hotel's publicity man, who had the purple face and hoarse voice of a humorous fellow who was chiefly engaged in drinking himself to death.

"Hello, Hughson," he cried. "We meet again."

"We do. And this is Mr. Charles Habble, who has just saved two English counties from being blown up."

"I know. Delighted to meet you, Mr. Habble. Great story. All right here?"

"No," said Hughson severely, "no boxing-gloves in the hotel shop. We've just tried."

"Well, what of it? We've no sea-lions in the hotel swimming-pool either."

"Didn't know you had a swimming-pool. You see, Habble, how they're keeping things dark from us. Let's go and have a swim. No, we can't, there isn't time."

"We'll have a drink instead," said Brooks cheerfully.

"We will," cried Hughson. "All we've got to do is to ask. Give it a name."

"Whisky and soda," said Brooks, without taking an instant's thought.

"Well, I don't know," said Charlie slowly. "Bit early, isn't it?"

"Not it. The exact moment for a drink."

"A glass of bitter?" said Charlie, not very hopefully.

Hughson shook his head. "You'd wound them terribly by asking for a glass of bitter. They'd probably have to send out for it in a taxi. No, leave this to me." He ordered the whisky and soda and two double side-cars, and then found that the office wanted him on the telephone. This left Brooks free to get something out of Charlie.

"Of course you've only just arrived, Mr. Habble," he said, in a very quiet, soothing tone. "But you might be able to tell me one or two things. For instance, what's your first impression of this hotel? What strikes you about it?"

"Too warm and not enough fresh air," replied Charlie promptly.

"You're right, you're perfectly right, but I can't use that. Now, for instance, have you ever been in any hotel as luxurious as this? No, of course you haven't. Did you ever imagine there was such a place? No, of course you didn't."

"It's like being in a piece at the theatre, being here," said Charlie, trying to help.

"Good! That's very useful. What do you think of the bathroom?"

"A knock-out. I bet you want to wash yourself twice over."

"Tried the bed yet?"

"No," said Charlie, "too early."

"Best beds in Europe. We spent a fortune on those beds."

"Well, I expect you can only get one lot of sleep out of them every night the same as any other beds."

The drinks arrived, and with them three more newspaper-men and a photographer. From now onwards it became very confusing. The little rose and grey sitting-room was loud with raised voices and filled with smoke, out of which strange faces peered. More drinks arrived, and more people.

"You know," said one young man to Charlie, "you talk just like that girl I've been interviewing."

"What girl?"

"Your rival. The girl who's just won the *Morning Pictorial's* beauty competition—Miss England, she's become. The Beauty Queen. Gets a silver rose, a hundred and fifty pounds, and a trial with the films."

"And is she a beauty queen?" asked Charlie.

"I've seen worse. Quite a good-looking girl. But the point is, she talks just like you—same accent. She must come from the same part."

"Where does she come from?"

The young man examined the back of an envelope. "Her name's Ida Chatwick, when she isn't Miss England, and she comes from Pondersley."

This delighted Charlie. It made him feel more at home. "Oh—if she comes from Pondersley, she does come from the same part. It's only fifteen mile from where I used to live, Pondersley is. I've played football there many a time. Lot o' rough devils they was, too. I remember once they chased us right off the field and out of the ground, just because we were winning and we'd been given a penalty they thought we oughtn't to have. I'd like to meet her."

"Now this is just where I come in," and a fattish woman pushed herself between them. She seemed

to Charlie a most frightening female. She had a very long nose, and her fat face was as thickly daubed with red paint and white powder as a clown's. "I want you to tell me something about your love life, Mr. Habble."

"My what?"

"Your love life."

"Here, steady!" Charlie was horrified.

"Now don't tell me," the lady continued, rolling her eyes at him, "that you're not interested in us. Didn't I overhear you saying you would like to meet some girl? Now didn't I?"

"Well—yes—that's right." He avoided that rolling eye. Awful old bit, this was.

The young man now explained about Miss England, and the pair of them told one another, without further reference to Charlie, what a good idea it would be to bring them together, and what a good story could be made out of this part of it and that part of it, until Charlie felt like a lamb-chop waiting on the counter until the butcher and his customer had finished their chat. And then other people came to ask him what he thought about the British Empire and cigarette coupons and Aston Villa and Territorials and films and coal fuel and Russia and Marriage and this hotel, and fellows with cameras asked him to look their way and then made electric bulbs flare at him, and they drank his health and said he was a fine fellow, and then at last Hughson cleared them out and said he must go too, and told Charlie to expect him in the morning.

He was alone. The airless little room was horribly

stale with smoke and the smell of whisky and cocktails. It seemed to be filled with cigarette stubs and crumpled newspapers. Charlie looked about him in disgust. His mouth was very dry and his head ached. His burned arm was beginning to trouble him again, and it would have to be dressed. He had had a fairly good night's sleep, for he was back in his lodgings last night by twelve, but now he felt more tired than he usually did after a whole day's or night's hard work. He yawned and yawned, and found his eyes smarting. He knew it could not be later than seven o'clock, yet he felt it might be two in the morning. Now he took his arm out of the sling, carefully removed his coat, and very slowly began to unfasten the dressing on his arm.

There was a light tap at the door, and somebody came in. "Chambermaid, sir," said a very impersonal voice. Charlie turned round to look at the young woman, who had caroty hair and a very much turned-up nose, but looked very neat and pleasant in her uniform. For a moment, she looked at him in the same way in which she had first spoken, like a smoothly-running machine. Then she turned into a human being.

"What are you doing here?" she asked severely.

"I'm staying here, in these rooms. It's all right, isn't it?"

"Oh—I'm sorry. You didn't look like the sort that stays here, and so I thought you were one of the chaps we've had working at the end of the corridor." She stared hard at him. "Oh—I know. You're the chap that did something very brave, aren't you? I saw your photo, and I heard this afternoon they were

bringing you here." She looked round and sniffed disdainfully. "What a mess!"

Charlie was apologetic. "Yes, it's a bit of a mess, isn't it? I couldn't help it, though. A lot of newspaper chaps came."

"Well, we're used to messes here," she said, with great scorn. "You ought to see some of the women's bedrooms. They don't know what decent tidiness is, half of 'em. Here, what's the matter with your arm?"

"It got burnt. I've got to put some stuff on it, and then tie it up again."

"I see. Oh—beg your pardon!" And then she instantly changed from a human being into a chamber-maid again, with a face that had no expression on it and a voice that didn't mean anything. "Can I get you anything, sir?"

"Look here," said Charlie wistfully, "you're not forced to talk like that, are you?"

"Not if nobody's listening."

"Well, drop it then."

So she changed back again, and at once said to him very severely: "All right, but it's no good sitting there like a great helpless baby, is it? Here, I'll do that arm. No, I'll do it." She made a grab at him, and he cheerfully submitted, knowing these over-worked and exasperated females of old, and he was not at all surprised to find she was making a very good job of it.

"I'm looking forward to leaving this place to get married," she told him. "And now I come to think of it, I must be a fool. Lot of change it'll be going to look after one of you creatures."

Charlie grinned. "He's not like me. Is he?"

"He'd make two of you."

"Here, steady. I'm not so little, you know."

"No, but he's a real big chap. Six foot two he is, and broad with it, too."

"Awkward when he starts knocking you about."

"I'll knock you about if you start talking like that. He wouldn't. He's not that sort. A bit too soft, if you ask me. Let's people put on him. I've told him so, more than once. I wish they'd me to deal with."

"What's it like here?" Charlie enquired, thoroughly at ease now.

"Not much good. Food's awful. The head chef gets so much to provide us all with food, and you should see what he gives us. I wish he'd send some of it into the dining-room one night. That would be a change for some of 'em."

"I'll bet you get good tips, though," said Charlie.

"Now and again we do. But the people that comes here aren't such good tippers as you'd think. I was at Brighton before, and it wasn't such a classy place, but I made just as much and hadn't anything like so much running about to do. Some of the women that stay here just drive you mad. Before they've been in their rooms five minutes, you'd think there had been an earthquake, the mess there is. And then they think you've nothing else to do but just run about for them. Spoilt to death, they are—some of 'em. I wish some of their men could see what they're really like. Ignorant, chalky-faced, bony bits of nothing! I'd chambermaid 'em, if I'd my way. I'd make 'em work a bit—for a change."

By this time, the chambermaid, who had not been

idle a moment while she had been talking, had dressed Charlie's arm and helped him on with his coat and sling, and then had begun tidying up the two rooms. She seemed to Charlie a real human being among a lot of strange creatures, a very fine girl; though he was glad that he was not marrying her. That was obviously a job for a fellow of six foot two. Already, however, he felt a sort of brotherly affection for her, and was calling her "Carrots" safely under his breath.

"There!" she cried triumphantly, and looked about her with a commander's eye. She gave Charlie a friendly smile. "That'll do. And you'll do, too. You seem a very nice young fellow, so don't let 'em go and spoil you now you've got your name in the papers. And watch them waiters. Most of 'em are on the make—I don't know that I blame 'em either—and they'll do you down if they can. Have you got a girl?"

"No," replied Charlie, who was tired of this question.

"Pity. You ought to have. Well, mind what you're doing then. You need Fred to look after you."

"I don't. Who's Fred—your young man?"

"Yes, and he's a policeman." She gave him a combined nod, wink, and general grimace which suggested that in being engaged to a policeman there was a whole world of delight into which he could never enter. Then she left him staring, rather forlornly, at the grey door with its idiotic panels picked out in rose pink.

Charlie decided now that he would feel better if he had something to eat. Among these people, he knew, it was dinner-time. Well, he would have some dinner, too. For a few minutes, however, he did nothing but move about restlessly and touch things, a telephone book, a pink ash-tray, a foot-stool that had green birds embroidered on it. He moved about in a tiring, tiptoe fashion, for he did not feel yet that these rooms were his, but that at any moment somebody would pop up and in a loud authoritative voice tell him to get out of them. Normally he was a generous, splashing, noisy washer, but now, in this strange, shining magnificence that did not belong to him, he had a very cautious little wash, hardly making a sound. Fortunately there was nobody outside in the corridor to see him creep along it, his footfalls lost in the thick carpet. He did not use the lift, but hastily descended the grand staircase, which brought him into the middle of the lounge.

Within ten minutes he was back in his sitting-room, which was now beginning to look like a haven, a home. Downstairs had been too much for him. Everybody there had been grand and haughty in evening dress, the women all bare back, the men all starch and studs. These people had hard stares. Some of them had very hard voices, too, especially the women. They all frightened Charlie, who had taken one look into the dining-room and had

decided at once that it was not for him. Somewhere below there was a Grill Room, where apparently you could eat without being dressed up, but Charlie was not venturing further. You could eat in your room, it seemed: after all, hadn't you only got to ask?

Having entertained the idea of food for the last quarter of an hour or so, he was feeling quite hungry. He went to the telephone arrangement and examined it. He moved the pointer on the dial, as the assistant manager had directed, to Room Service. His hand went towards the receiver, hesitated, retreated, found its way into his pocket. He walked away from the instrument, and then, for no particular reason that he could discover, took a look at himself in the glass. Well, what was the matter with him? He was all right, wasn't he? Of course he was all right. And he wanted something to eat, and he'd only got to ask. Well, ask then. Back he went, and this time he boldly picked up the receiver. It was all right. The young woman at the other end seemed quite pleased to learn that he wanted something to eat.

A waiter arrived, a tall and very dark fellow, a foreigner, with a devilish, sneering look about him. He handed over a very large card. The menu, this was. There was so much of it that Charlie gave up the struggle at once, and had only time to notice that, if you were silly enough, you could pay six shillings for a bit of melon. Charlie looked up and met the dark glance of this sinister foreigner. You could have put the chap straight into a film as a spy, one of the very worst.

Charlie swallowed, then muttered hastily: "You got steak and chips?"

The foreigner was bewildered, or probably pretending to be, out of devilment.

"Steak and chips," shouted Charlie, very angry all at once.

"Sairtainly, sair," the man stammered. "Steak-an-cheeps. You can 'ave zem. An' somesing else?"

"Bread. And—and—some beer, if you've got any?"

"Yes, sair, beer. Bass beer, sair. Any sweet?" And he indicated the menu.

Charlie handed it back to him, shaking his head gloomily, as if he was not allowed to eat anything else. The man departed, looking a little less devilish than when he came. He did not return; the steak and chips, the bread and beer, were brought by a younger and smaller waiter, who never spoke a word. When Charlie was left alone with his food and drink, he felt like a man who had successfully performed a minor miracle. It was all right. You asked for steak and chips, and they brought them, good steak and chips, too; and the Bass tasted like any other Bass. He made a good meal out of it all. When he had done, he felt twice the man he had been. Here he was, and it was his business to make the most of it and the best of it. He lit a cigarette, marched downstairs and out of the hotel without so much as a glance to right or left, and began to explore the West End of London.

It was a mild spring night. He had never seen so many coloured lights before; there was even a rainbow searchlight somewhere in the sky: it was grand. He found his way to Piccadilly Circus, Leicester

Square, and Shaftesbury Avenue. He stopped to admire the glittering windows of Lyons' biggest Corner House. He saw a negro arguing with two Chinese. There were a lot of fine girls about, but most of them were overdoing the paint and powder. He had never seen so many Jews before; at least, they were all hook-nosed, smallish, very dark, and so looked like Jews. There were some unemployed Welsh miners singing strange hymns in chorus. He saw a man nearly knocked down by a taxi. He examined the photographs outside the theatres, and thought too many of the people in them looked goggle-eyed. He was there when an oldish woman in black fell down in a faint or a fit, and they took her into a chemist's opposite. He wondered which of the queer fellows he saw hanging about street corners were in the dope traffic, about which he had read in his Sunday paper. It was lonely but fascinating, this exploring, but it was also very tiring. Your heart ached a bit, and your feet ached a lot. It was only about half-past nine, too early to go back to the hotel, so he paid his shilling and entered one of the little News Theatres.

There, a very queer thing happened. He saw and heard two minutes of life on an alligator farm, a lot of American aeroplanes doing stunts, wasps building nests, some women swaying and simpering in the latest fashions, soldiers parading and saluting, and several notables of this and other countries shaking hands, barking speeches of thanks, and getting hurriedly in and out of cars. And then it happened, without any warning. The flickering letters on the screen read: *Man Who Saved A Town—*

*Utterton Hero receives cheque from editor of "Daily Tribune";* and the sound part of the apparatus blared out a noisy march tune. And there he was, a horrible grinning ghost, side by side with Mr. Shuckleworth (not a bad picture of him), standing out against a background of scratchy noises. It made him feel sick. There he went: "Thank you, Mr. Shuckleworth, I only did my duty, but I'm very grateful to the *Daily Tribune*." He sounded like Billy Potts, the old Bendworth pub. comic. And now—close up, and even worse. "Yes, I-believe-it-has-helped-me-to-do-my-duty — you know —whatever—my duty—as a good Englishman." Oh—God! If the other people in the audience recognised him, they ought to rise up and boot him out of the building. But the other people, apart from one or two upstairs who clapped, quietly went on staring, smoking, chewing, holding hands, and showed neither like nor dislike. But all over the country, very soon, they would see him and Mr. Shuckleworth and hear that stuff about his duty and the *Daily Tribune*. He felt deeply ashamed. He hurried out before the lights went up, and on his way out he told himself he was a fraud, and then wondered if all the other people in those pictures felt they were frauds too, all those big-wigs you saw getting in and out of special aeroplanes and official cars so hastily but importantly. Yes, what about them? Were they wonder heroes, too? His hotel was not far away—overlooking Green Park; he knew that much—and there was plenty of it to see, but it took him some time to find it, and all the while he was asking himself some rather queer questions. And

those coloured lights did not look so grand now.

When at last he came back to the magnificent entrance of the New Cecil, he was very tired indeed, and must have looked what he felt, a weary and puzzled young working chap in his not any too good best clothes. Anyhow, one of the purple and silver giants at the door stopped him abruptly and said: "Well, what is it?"

"What is it?" Charlie repeated. "Why, I'm staying here. Second Floor. Suite Twenty-three."

"Oh—very sorry, sir. This way, sir." The giant was all apologies now, bowing and scraping like a big soft fool.

"Here, listen to me," said Charlie, bold for once. "Not so much of the 'Very sorry, sir,' and soft soap business. I don't like that any more than I like the tap-on-the-shoulder 'Well, what is it?' style. Be a bit more human, can't you?"

The big fellow looked at him and the official expression cleared from his face. "Not in these clothes, I can't. Look at me. And I'm not sorry to be wearing 'em either, I can tell you. There were three hundred of us after this job, and I've got a missis and three kids down in Wandsworth. But no offence, y'know."

"Offence be damned. Good night."

"Good night. Coming, sir. This way, please, sir."

This time Charlie used the lift.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE BRAVE AND THE FAIR

#### 1

THE first thought that reached Charlie's mind, on waking next morning, was the dreadful one that he had lost his job. He had a moment's despair before he remembered all that had happened the previous day and could safely open his eyes to the New Cecil Hotel. He was, he reminded himself firmly, the chap they were making all this fuss about. He had a cheque for five hundred pounds in his coat pocket. He took a long and cautious look at his Antoinette suite bedroom, with its grey walls and pink decoration. It met his gaze quite firmly; it was there; it was real. His suit was laid out ready for him to put on in the most convenient and speediest fashion. He was here, in the great super de luxe place, living like a lord. All he'd got to do was to ask.

Some letters were brought in with his breakfast, which he had decided to eat in his sitting-room. They had been sent on from the *Daily Tribune*, where apparently they had been all opened, which seemed to Charlie a bit thick. He was not keen on letters, but after all, these were his letters, weren't they? After breakfast—for he did not believe in eating and reading a lot of strange letters at the same time—he lit a cigarette and went slowly through this

correspondence. Here were more letters than he ever got in a year.

They were all from strangers—except one. This was a short and excited letter from Daisy Halstead, now Daisy Fletcher, who said she was not a bit surprised, and that if he was not too grand now for his old friends, wouldn't he come and see her the very next time he was round that way. Charlie did not even pretend to be very knowing about girls, but he saw through this at once. She was sorry now, and would like to start something again, though she had only been Mrs. Fletcher five minutes. Well, he was not having any. Overlooking the fact that their separation had been mutual, he worked himself up into a fine mood of bitterness and cynicism, and enjoyed himself enormously. Compared with this the other letters were dull, though unexpected and bewildering enough. Five of them were from women who said he was a fine brave fellow, oddly like their late husbands or lost sons. One was from a woman who asked him what he proposed to do about cruelty to animals and vivisection. Two men wrote claiming old acquaintance, though both their names and addresses were strange to him. Another offered to make his fortune in some mysterious way. Another was very angry about fire escapes, and seemed to think that Charlie ought to have been in touch with him long ago. One who simply signed himself "Sergt." pointed out that he had been a wonder hero in the trenches and was now out of work and starving and that nobody cared about *him*. The remaining three seemed to be from lunatics, for Charlie could make nothing of them, could not

decipher them properly, though he tried hard with the one that began by calling him "My dream-man." He had just put them down, had told himself that he was now discovering what a lot of queer people there were in the world, when the comical young man with the brown puckered face, Hughson of the *Daily Tribune*, arrived.

"And the password this morning," he announced, "is pillage. We loot the city."

"What's on?" asked Charlie.

"Well, those aren't on much longer." He pointed to Charlie's suit. "I'm getting you an entirely new outfit—several new outfits, in fact. Suits, shoes, shirts, everything. I am your fairy godmother, my child."

"Who's paying for all this?"

"The shop is. It'll all go down to the advertisement account. Publicity — publicity — that's the word."

"Seems to me it's all publicity here," Charlie growled.

"Of course it is. Publicity and Lubricity. They've taken the place of Gog and Magog. We've arranged for you to go to Manshop. You know Manshop? The largest men's outfitting store in London, in Britain, in Europe—yes," he shouted, as if addressing a packed Albert Hall, "in the Eastern Hemisphere. God bless the Eastern Hemisphere! And why hasn't our friend Kinney ever written an article about it? Another striking article by Hal Kinney next Sunday: God Save Our Hemisphere."

"You're lively enough this morning, aren't you?"

"Fairly, fairly. But you've got to be the lively one

to-day. I've been given the job of showing you round and reporting in my own inimitable style your quaint sayings and doings. Yes, I've got a whole nice blank column to fill. Now, Mr. Habble, I see you've been reading your letters. Could I have something short, pithy, quaint, homely, manly, heroic about these letters?"

"They're loony."

"That's good. But can we use it? I doubt it. Get your hat. I promised to have you over at Manshop now."

Manshop, another immense new building, was not unlike the New Cecil, but it was not so bright and warm and had a deep religious hush of its own. Charlie had never seen such a shop before. All the young men in black coats and striped trousers stood there like young deacons and churchwardens. Here and there were glass cases in which shilling collars were floodlit against a background of black velvet. There was no banging about of green cardboard boxes as there always was in the shops that Charlie knew. It was like something between a church and a museum.

"And our motto," said Hughson, "is Service and Hocus Pocus. They all look as if they'd come to bury shirts and not to sell them. What would happen here if you shouted at the top of your voice for a couple of penny bone-back studs and then slapped down your tuppence on the counter? I'll bet the whole thing would disappear and you'd find yourself alone on Wanstead Flats with the harsh cackling of *geni* sounding in the middle air. Here we are. We're being met."

There were introductions. Charlie never quite understood who they all were, but among them were the inevitable two photographers.

"Have you an idea about this?" Hughson was asked.

"No, thank God!" he replied.

The other man had. His face was shiny with it. His temperature was rising. "We time it, d'you see?"

"Yes, I see," said Hughson solemnly. "You time it."

"That's right. We time it. The whole bag of tricks. Manshop says it can fit a man up quicker than anybody else. Mr. Habble here comes to be fitted. He's in a hurry. All right. They do it in record time. It's a good story."

"Great."

"Fine scheme."

Charlie did not say anything. Nobody seemed to want his opinion.

"Well, what's he going to have?" Hughson asked. "We must work that out. He's got to have a dress-suit, because he'll need it to-night—"

"What for?" Charlie enquired, but nobody took any notice of him.

"Tails or dinner-jacket?"

"Not tails, I think," replied Hughson. "Not in character. Essentially a black tie part."

"All right then. We do it this way. He goes first to our suitcase department and there we give him—"

"A suitcase," cried Hughson.

"No," said the other, quite seriously, "two suit-

cases. Then he gets a dinner-jacket suit and a lounge suit and a light overcoat—say, one of our Kempton coats."

"And what could be better," demanded Hughson, with an appearance of great earnestness, "than one of your Kemptons?"

"They're all packed into his two suitcases. Then shoes, socks, shirts, collars, ties, studs, braces, suspenders, and a hat or two. No, I tell you what. I've a better idea. What d'you think, boys? He changes into the lounge suit in our changing-room, has a hair-cut, and writes a letter. And we time it all."

"Good scheme."

"And we play fair. No measuring. But we're entitled to have a good look at him. I'll get Mr. Martin."

He got Mr. Martin, and the two of them solemnly stared at Charlie and then walked round him several times.

"But look here," Charlie began.

"That's all right. You leave it to us. All right, Mr. Martin? Well, we can start in five minutes. And let's get our watches right before we start."

Charlie was as fond as the next person of getting something for nothing, but this way of doing it turned out to be like an unpleasant dream. The whole gang of them, enjoying themselves immensely, as if they had just discovered a new sport, rushed him upstairs and downstairs, in and out of departments, up to counters and away from them again; coats, trousers, shirts, collars, ties, were piled in front of him and then whisked into his suitcases;

he was pushed into chairs and then pulled out of them again; until at the end he was out of breath and out of temper. It was the barber, the last man in the establishment to wait upon him, who suffered for this. He was a superior sniffing fellow, who did not seem to like the look of Charlie's head. After he had bestowed several contemptuous sniffs upon it, he said in a maddening tone of voice: "I'd like to know who's been trying to cut your hair lately."

"You would, would you? Well, come a bit nearer and I'll tell you." The barber leaned over. "Micky Mouse," roared Charlie at the top of his voice. "And now you can either get on with the job or chuck it, and I don't care which."

At that moment one of the two photographers came up and said, for about the seventh time: "Now just look towards me and give me a bit of a smile. This'll make a good picture."

But Charlie had had too much of this.

"Now then," said the photographer.

"Oh go away and take somebody else—I've had enough of it this morning. Who d'you think I am—Greta Garbo?"

"I wish to God you were, and then there'd be something in the job." And the photographer went snorting on his way.

Nevertheless, Charlie had to admit to himself that in his new blue suit, which was lighter than his other and was delicately striped, in his new blue socks, his blue and white shirt and collar and darker blue tie, his new shoes, he looked smarter than he had ever done in his life before, and as good as any-

body he had seen at the New Cecil. He told Hughson so.

"My dear chap," said Hughson, "you're the very picture of a fine, manly, clean-living young Englishman. And so long as you don't get it wet, this outfit ought to last you several weeks. Why, I've known some of these suits last three months. And now you're so braced with yourself, I can break the news. It came through on the telephone while they were throwing shirts at you. You're now to have the honour of meeting the big boy, the great chief himself, Sir Gregory Hatchland, the proprietor of the *Daily Tribune*, the *Sunday Courier*, *Mabel's Weekly*, *Our Little Pets*, the *Boys' Joker*, and the *Runner Duck Record*."

## 2

The office of the *Daily Tribune* had borrowed several devices and tricks from America. One of them was a frequent and ridiculous use of the word "conference." Meetings and interviews, discussions and chats, these had disappeared from the *Daily Tribune* office, which was filled with people "in conference." Late on this particular morning, Kinney was in conference with the proprietor, Sir Gregory Hatchland. Sir Gregory was about to embark on one of his grandiose schemes, the mere rumour of which was sufficient to send a wave of despair flooding the office. Everybody knew that for weeks, perhaps for months, the staffs of the *Tribune* and the *Sunday Courier* would have to

wait hand and foot upon this new monster, whatever it was. This time it was a League of Imperial Yeoman, out of Militant Imperialism by Fascism. Sir Gregory was not yet mad about it; that stage had yet to come; but an old *Tribune* hand like Kinney knew very well that it would arrive very soon and that within a fortnight they would be all serving up Imperial Yeomen, like a red-white-and-blue sauce, with almost every dish of news and views they concocted. It was, however, in the early stages that Kinney, with his famous broad human touch, was particularly useful, and so he was always present at the flaring false dawn of any of these schemes. This explains why he was now in conference with the great man, who was happily barking away over his cigar, seeing himself as the big tough fellow turned visionary, two parts Napoleon to one part American magnate of the type popularised by the talkies. There was a considerable histrionic strain in Gregory Hatchland, as Kinney, who was not without it himself, had recognised long ago. On some days there was more good acting to be found in the *Tribune* office than there was in many West End theatres.

At this moment, however, Kinney was not thinking about the Imperial Yeomen, the *Tribune*, or his creation, young Habble the hero, who had been sent for by Sir Gregory. He was looking at his employer and seeing him afresh. The long bony figure, the long brown face, the grizzled electric hair, the fierce eyebrows that seemed to dart independently up and down his face like two quick hairy insects, all this was familiar enough. But he

noticed now, it seemed for the first time, that Sir Gregory had cruel bright eyes, and that these eyes were shadowed by long curling eyelashes, preposterous on the face of a newspaper magnate in his early fifties. And no sooner had Kinney noticed those eyes and their absurd lashes than a thought came like a flash of lightning. Supposing it was Sir Gregory who was his wife's lover?

"And that's why I told Shuckleworth to tell you to go ahead," Sir Gregory was saying, or rather barking. His jerky, hoarse, masterful voice was famous, and an imitation of it became part of the social repertoire of every new reporter in the office. "Made a good story. Just when we wanted one, too. Right kind of story, too. The *Tribune* touch, eh? But there's more than that in it, handled properly."

"That's what I thought," Kinney heard himself saying. He was still staring, fascinated by a menacing unfamiliarity in that familiar face. Why shouldn't Sir Gregory be sleeping with his wife? Not impossible at all—by God it wasn't. He knew, everybody knew, what Sir Gregory was like and capable of doing where women were concerned. That was one of the complications of life on the *Tribune* staff. One week you all had to be praising some charmer and then next week you were told never to mention her name again; and the million *Tribune* readers had been engaged for years in helping the chief to conduct his amorous sieges and lover's quarrels, and unknowingly kept getting in and out of bed with his ladyloves. A bit thick, that, when you came to think about it; and now Kinney was thinking about it. But what he said was: "My

idea from the start was that we might be able to make some sort of national figure out of Habble, and then he'd be useful to you in all sorts of ways."

"Yeh," Sir Gregory snapped. He had been saving time and energy on this sibilant for years. He paid other men to say "Yes" for him. "Well, we'll see. Looks good so far. You were pretty smart, picking up the story like that. Have to send you down into the country again, Kinney."

He ought to have been pleased by this compliment, but suddenly it looked sinister. So he'd have to be out of London again soon, would he? Did this explain why he had been sent down to see Stoneley? And hadn't there been for some time in the office a mysterious tendency to encourage him to leave town? He had long had a torture chamber inside, waiting for a moment like this, and now it got to work with a quick clanking of instruments and glare of hell fires.

Sir Gregory stared at him. "What the devil are you looking like that for? What's the matter?"

Astonished to find he had revealed so much, Kinney stammered that it was nothing.

"Kinney," and this was a very sharp bark—"you're drinking too much. You're not fit. Don't be a dam' fool. Cut out the whisky for a bit," he continued, more amiably, "take some exercise, more fresh air. Ever tried one of the spas?"

"No, I haven't. Don't want to either. I'm all right."

"Well, you don't look all right to me." There was a real kindly concern in Sir Gregory's glance and tone now. This concern was one of his best

traits as an employer, and Kinney had praised it many a time, in and out of print. "When you've done these little jobs, I'll have you packed off for a holiday. Talk about it later. Told 'em to get this Habble fellow here to see me. Where is he?" And he began ringing bells and shouting down telephones.

Kinney was thinking about the evening when Sir Gregory had dined with them. That was about two years ago. He had been immensely attentive, flattering, genially impressive, to Jill. Kinney had taken this as a compliment to himself. Had something started then? He remembered now that Sir Gregory had congratulated him the next day on possessing such a delightful little wife. He also remembered that from that day to this, Jill had never been mentioned between them. Sir Gregory never enquired after her, never made the slightest reference to her. It might be that she had passed out of his mind, but now that did not seem very likely. No, it was significant, horribly significant, that the chief never mentioned her at all. Why should he, if they were at their little games together, laughing at the poor fool of a husband?

Habble had arrived in the building, so Kinney was sent downstairs to bring him into the presence. All the time he was worrying away at his own wretched and maddening problem. What real evidence had he? Not a scrap. Would Jill take a fellow like Sir Gregory, more than five-and-twenty years older than she was, as a lover? Did she like that kind of man? He didn't know, and that was what made it all so maddening. He didn't know.

was simply lost in the dark. And if he began asking questions he did not believe he would come within miles of the truth. Blast the pair of them.

Habble was all dressed up and smart now. This annoyed Kinney, who felt that this young man was his own creation and had no right to appear suddenly all spruced up without his permission, looking too as if he was ready to do a bit of lady-killing. Why, Kinney told himself miserably, if he took this fellow home, Jill might be sleeping with him tomorrow for all her poor lost fool of a husband might know or be able to do,

"Come on," he cried sharply, "you're late. All right, Hughson, you're not wanted. The chief's waiting."

When they went in, Sir Gregory was busy doing his stuff for the newcomer's benefit. There was not anybody—not even the smallest office boy—he did not want to impress at first. Kinney cursed him for a charlatan.

"So this is our hero—eh, Kinney? Glad to meet you. Sit down, sit down. Suppose you're beginning to think you are somebody now, eh?"

Habble began to mumble a reply.

Sir Gregory brought his eyebrows well down and then let them fly up again. "You look all right. Looks all right, Kinney. Yeh. Do very well. Enjoying yourself, eh? Too early to say, p'r'aps. Women got at you yet? They will, they will. Always do. Kinney'll tell you that." And he gave a quick hoarse laugh.

Kinney tried to look amused, but failed. What did he mean by that stuff about women? Probably

—nothing. After all he always talked like that. Kinney asked himself again, desperately, what evidence he had. All nonsense. Torturing himself for a mere obscene fancy. And having decided that, he was instantly visited by a vague but infinitely disturbing little image of his wife and Sir Gregory together, laughing at him.

"The *Tribune* and I are doing something for you," Sir Gregory was saying to Habble, "and I expect you'd like to do something for me and the *Tribune*. Eh? Right. And for the Empire. Care about the Empire, don't you?"

"No," said Habble slowly, "I can't say that I do."

"What? How's this?"

"Well, I want to tell you the truth——"

"Good man. That's what we want—the truth."

My God, Kinney cried to himself, you're right. And how do we get it?

"If I'd ever seen it," Habble continued earnestly, "or if it had ever done anything for me, I expect I'd care about it. As it is, I don't much. They don't up our way. We're not great on the Empire."

"Time you were then," Sir Gregory barked. "You're all Britishers and it's your Empire."

"Well, I must say I've never fancied myself much as a Britisher. It's not something we hear much talk about, not where I come from. Mind you, we're English all right. Oh yes—we're English."

"Same thing. Time you read your *Daily Tribune* a bit more carefully." This was severe and the eyebrows did some heavy work with it, but then immediately every trace of that severity vanished, the blue eyes wrinkled and twinkled, the grim mouth

broadened into a grin, the eyebrows hovered playfully. The effect was dramatic, disarming.

Kinney had watched the trick before, but now it did not leave him a bored spectator. He saw Sir Gregory working this scowl-and-smile business on women and saw it succeeding with dozens of them, with his wife Jill. That scowl would shatter her outlying defences and then the smile would drag her out of the central citadel, conquered, melting. He saw that big greedy hand taking hold of her.

"I'm starting a League of Imperial Yeomen," the great man was saying now. "Save the Empire. Yeh. Kinney'll tell you about it. Going to have a big meeting soon. Want you on the platform—"

"Here, steady," cried Habble, at once on the defensive.

It was an odd thing, Kinney reflected, but this chap seemed to be less in awe of the Chief than he had been of Kinney himself. Possibly, after this one quick great gulp of London, Habble felt more self-confident. But Kinney felt there was more than that in it. Hal Kinney meant something to him, whereas Sir Gregory Hatchland meant nothing. That was it, and it was a pleasant conclusion to arrive at. He had his public.

"We'll tell you what to say. Just a few words, to say you've joined the League. Nothing in it. You'll like it. Crowds, cheering, excitement. May want you to attend one or two big provincial meetings too. Looking after you all right? Enjoy yourself. Consider yourself a member of the *Daily Tribune* staff—one of us. A happy band of brothers, eh, Kinney?"

This was Kinney's own phrase, and now, returning to him with what seemed a faintly sardonic emphasis, it made him feel sick. Habble was dismissed, but Kinney was not allowed to retire with him. Sir Gregory wanted to discuss an article that would sound the alarm up and down the column and introduce into the last artful paragraph a reference to the Imperial Yeomen.

"Something domestic I think this time, Kinney. Your special touch, y'know. Never mind the broad national issues. What about the home, the loving little wife, the kiddies? That's the line. You can do it, nobody better. The threat to our loved ones. Yeh. That's it."

Kinney wanted to bang his fist down on the table and scream something about his wife. But after all, he had no evidence. Probably it was all nonsense. And yet—and yet—there was something. . . .

"All right, Sir Gregory. I'll do that. It ought to make a good smashing feature." And he meant it. He could see that article beginning to take shape, colour, warmth. What about your wife and kiddies, your little home that means everything to you, the heritage of Love?

Jimmy Busk, theatrical publicity man, sat in his tiny office staring solemnly at his secretary, Miss Hooper. He was a small plump young man with large melting brown eyes, which suggested that he might cry at any moment. But Jimmy never did

cry; nor did he laugh very often; he was always rather solemn and wistful, not unlike a poetical little boy who has just been told that there are no more desert islands. Perhaps Jimmy's secret self brooded constantly on desert islands. The rest of him spent nearly all its time in that very tiny world which has Trafalgar Square near its South Pole and Cambridge Circus well up in its Arctic regions, and about this world he had no illusions whatever. Jimmy Busk knew everything; he could tell you why What's-his-name had put money into *The Green Goose*, why there had been so many quarrels at the rehearsals of *The Meddler*, how much the *Imperial* had made and the *Frivolity* dropped last week; and he was always well posted in the shifting directory of theatrical relationships, in what might be called the *Theatre Who's With Whom*. His job was to secure publicity, in the shape of photographs, news stories and gossip paragraphs, for the productions that employed him, and also, on first and other special nights to see that minor dramatic critics and theatrical gossip writers were well supplied with free drinks. For this he usually got ten to twelve guineas for the first three weeks of a run and five guineas a week afterwards; and as he nearly always had several theatres in his charge and his expenses were small (even his meals were paid for by occasional paragraphs) he did very nicely out of it all. He owed his comparative success not only to the fact that he was well liked in Fleet Street, but also to the fact that he was nearly always quite sober and never fell in love with actresses, whom he regarded off the stage as so much raw and usually unpromis-

ing material for publicity. His greatest dislike was reserved for what is known as the theatrical public, that is, not the great public whose interest means a long run, but the people who are always found chattering in foyers. On the other hand, he appreciated really good plays, which only rarely came his way. Inside, deep down, he was amazed at his own success and life seemed like a fairy tale, but he had the good sense not to let the least glimmer of this happy bewilderment appear outside.

At this moment, knowing very well that he was not really staring *at* her but *through* her, Miss Hooper did not speak. He was in search of an idea. There was one frisking about like a grasshopper at the back of his mind.

"I've got an idea," he announced finally.

Miss Hooper, who was large, stirred again at last. It was all right now. The little office thawed into movement and sound. "What's it for?" she asked.

"Susie Dean's show at the *Cavendish*. It's sticking badly. The libraries won't move. Plenty of people coming to town—good popular show too—though it's too like Susie's last and I told Brale so."

"He rang up again this morning."

"He wants a good story, and I've got the very thing. I saw Hughson of the *Tribune* and got him to promise he'd bring that hero they're running to any show I wanted. Well, that's all right, but I felt it just didn't ring the bell."

"He hasn't been to a theatre yet, has he? That ought to be good."

"It's all right, but it doesn't ring the bell. But

suppose I get that girl there too, and make 'em share a box? Now that's a story."

"That girl—?"

"The girl the *Morning Pictorial's* running, who won their beauty contest—Miss England—the Silver Rose. That girl. Better get on to 'em now."

"Gregory?"

"Try Gregory. If he's not handling it, he'll tell us who is." And then Jimmy's melting brown eyes looked into the distance a thousand leagues from his own tiny world, but at the same time he whistled, softly and carefully, a tune from this show at the *Cavendish*. Meanwhile, Miss Hooper was as efficient as usual at the telephone.

"They say," she announced finally, "that Gregory's in charge of her and they're probably over at the New Cecil now. She's staying there. Does anybody ever pay to stay at the New Cecil?"

"Not many—yet. I don't suppose many people ever will. What a packet they're going to drop on that place! What a packet! Well, find out if they're in and if they are, I'll go along."

They were. "And what about Brale?" Miss Hooper asked.

"As soon as I've booked her for to-night, ask Brale or the box-office man if I can have Box A for to-night. And get the usual lot round. Brale's room in the interval. And confirm it with the *Tribune* people—Hughson's looking after it—about their chap coming. And if Marjorie rings up again, tell her from me that even if we paid 'em to print that story, they wouldn't use it."

He found Gregory, a saturnine fellow with thick

glasses and a sharp nose, in a suite on the second floor, getting rid of a pair of publicity people working for some beauty preparation concern. He was introduced to the winner of the *Morning Pictorial's* Silver Rose and money prize, a little provincial girl called Ida Chatwick. He looked her over coolly and critically, for in his world the charms of sex were a trade factor, and he numbered beauties by the dozen among his acquaintance. She was not bad at all; not to be compared with any of the famous charmers of the theatre and the films, but a cut above the usual beauty prize miss from Little Puddleton. It was a very English type, nothing exotic about it, good bread-and-butter in feminine beauty. Her hair, which was fine and of a medium brown shade, was brushed smoothly across the top of her head and then curled a little at each side. She had rather large smoky blue eyes under wide brows. Her nose had the same slight curve as her cheeks. Her mouth was soft, full, but rather weak, and her chin did nothing to remove that weakness. Her neck, however, was grandly broad, white and smooth, and perhaps the most notable feature of her figure, which was good, but had not the little additional length of leg that gives distinction to a woman's body. All this Jimmy noticed in a few seconds, as his glance travelled rapidly from her head to her heels. There was little time for more than that, for the girl immediately disappeared into the bedroom, leaving the two men alone in the little sitting-room.

"Well, Jimmy," said Gregory softly, "what do you think of our prize-winner?"

"Not bad," replied Jimmy seriously. "Not bad at all. Not a knock-out, of course, but I've seen worse, especially as winners of beauty competitions. Where's she come from?"

"Little place called Pondersley, somewhere in the Midlands. Worked in a factory there—nothing tough, y'know—some mechanical, neat, clean little job. Nice kid, but dull. No temperament, no sex appeal stuff. Real English virgin, our best home-fed."

"That's why she's dull," said Jimmy, who had often had to discuss this subject before. "You've got to have a dash of something foreign—Irish, French, Spanish, Jew—just a dash will do it—to make an English girl really amusing. Otherwise, they're like rice pudding. I've noticed it many a time."

"Well, if you've got to have the same pudding every day," said Gregory, "it 'ud better be rice pudding. But you're thinking about the theatre now, Jimmy, not about real life. This kid's got ambitions there. She gets a film test or two as part of her prize, and she's all excited about that and thinks she's all set for Elstree and Hollywood and the big electric lights."

"And is she?"

"Not if I know anything. She doesn't photograph too well and she's not got the temperament. No, Jimmy, I can tell you what'll happen to her," he continued, with the air of an entomologist about to sketch the brief life of an insect. "She's too grand now for the old job in where-is-it—Pondersley—and sleeping in the back bedroom with her sister. She won't go back there. We've spoilt her for that.

She'll get nowhere in the theatre or films. She'll be lucky if she can find any other decent job. And so if she doesn't get married quick or take to sleeping with somebody, I don't know what she'll do. But the point is, we've thoroughly spoilt her for her old life and we can't really push her into any other, especially if she takes her virginity very seriously, as I suspect this one does. In short, Jimmy, we present her with our silver rose and our hundred and fifty quid, and then we do her in. Her only chance is to go back home *now*, and be satisfied with queening it in Pondersley and being stared at when she walks into the local Electric Theatre de Luxe, escorted by the eldest son of the town auctioneer. But of course you couldn't make her see that if you tried, and I've no intention of trying."

"Neither have I. Listen, Greg, I came over because I want you to bring her to the *Cavendish* to-night."

"Not to-night, Jimmy. Can't be done. She's making an appearance—but only in a box—at the *Frivolity*. It was fixed up last night."

"Then you can unfix it. No, listen, Greg."

"Can I come in?" The girl stood in the doorway, looking from one to the other and trying to appear at ease.

"Of course you can, Miss Chatwick," replied Gregory, returning to a more impersonal tone of voice. "After all, it's your sitting-room. Besides, you'd better listen to this. It concerns you."

"How thrilling!"

"About to-night."

"You said I was going to have a box at the *Frivolity*." She was ready to be disappointed.

"That's the idea."

"Listen, Greg. I've thought about this. There isn't really a good story in it either for you or the theatre. You've got to give 'em more than that, these days. Why, I'd arranged for this chap that the *Tribune's* running so hard—their working-man wonder hero, as they call him—to come to the *Cavendish* to-night. He's a bigger story than yours," he continued, just as if the smaller story, otherwise Miss Ida Chatwick, had not been there at all, "very much bigger."

"Is he?" Gregory was reflective.

"Of course he is, and you know it. And even with him, I don't think it's quite good enough—won't ring the bell. What I want is the two of them together to-night at the *Cavendish*. In the big box —A. The beauty and bravery of England. That's something like it."

"Oh—I'd love it," cried Miss Chatwick, who may have been shy, but had no intention of being completely ignored.

"Of course you would," Jimmy told her. "Just what you want. Marvellous publicity." His brown eyes melted vaguely in her direction.

Gregory got up. "Yes, it's a better scheme, Jimmy. I'll telephone and get out of the *Frivolity* visit. By the way, I thought the *Frivolity* was one of your theatres."

"Used to be, but Parkinson and I couldn't hit it."

"Who's doing their publicity now then?"

"The secret service, I should think. It's dud, anyhow." He watched Gregory at the telephone, then, after a moment or two, turned to the girl. "This *Tribune* chap's staying in this hotel. You may have seen him."

She shook her head. "No, I haven't. I've read about him and seen his photograph. He comes from up our way. It'll be awfully nice meeting him."

"You'll be photographed together, and then you'll be sitting together in front of the royal box at the *Cavendish*. It's a good show too, best musical show in town. Susie Dean's in it."

"Oo, is she? I've always wanted to see Susie Dean."

"And I may be able to fix up for you both to go out to supper afterwards—dancing and a cabaret—probably at the *Café Pompadour*."

The girl's face brightened. She might come from a factory in a small provincial town, but clearly she had read about the *Café Pompadour*. The gossip writers and photographers, and incidentally Jimmy himself, who did the *Pompadour's* publicity, had not laboured in vain. They had sown the seed as far as distant Pondersley.

"All right, Jimmy," said Gregory, returning from the telephone, "that's a date. I'll bring her along myself. Meet you there, I suppose?"

"In the foyer at about twenty past eight, and then up in Brale's room at the interval. There'll be drinks, of course."

"You surprise me, Jimmy. Well, I'm going back to the office. Miss Chatwick, I'll call for you here

about eight, and have your best bib and tucker on, because you've to show yourself to-night as the Beauty Queen. Coming my way, Jimmy?"

"Yes. See you to-night, Miss Chatwick. And look nice, and we'll make you famous."

"I'm so excited," the girl exclaimed, swinging between ecstasy and despair, "I expect I'll look awful. Thanks ever so much." And she squeezed his hand and looked at him with great shining eyes.

"I must say," said Jimmy, as he trotted beside Gregory down the corridor, "I don't see what she's got to grumble at. I've not felt so pleased with life for years as that kid is now in there. Even if it is all a fiasco in a few days, she's had her little fling."

"Well, if she can look at it that way—all right. But I'm ready to bet you anything you like she won't. The kind that can do that usually manage to find their feet—or rather, manage to lose their feet at the right moment, with the right man. She'll not do that, and she won't be able to do anything else either. She's not the first I've seen, y'know, Jimmy. Within a few weeks, perhaps sooner—it depends how long she can make that hundred and fifty pounds last—and when they think they own the earth, even if they've never seen six pound notes together before, they can soon chuck a hundred and fifty away on themselves—she'll be wondering what to do with herself, probably wishing she was dead. What we ought to be doing now is putting her on that train back to Puddlecombe."

"She wouldn't go, Greg. And I don't blame her. She wants to see life."

"See life! Don't be a damn fool, Jimmy. She can

get all the life that's good for her at home at Pondersley."

"Why didn't you tell her all this yourself?"

"Because, for one thing, she wouldn't believe me, and for another thing, because I've got a wife and two kids to keep and I'm not paid to tell our beauty competition winners to go home just when the advertising and circulation departments can use them. I wish they'd take me off these damned competitions altogether. I've been running them now—one sort and another—for three years. It's like doing penal servitude in a madhouse."

"Well," said Jimmy dryly, "your particular bit of hard labour to-night will consist of putting on a dinner-jacket, bringing a pretty girl from the New Cecil to the *Cavendish*, and then of either watching Susie's new show or of smoking and drinking at the expense of the management up in Brale's room. That programme wouldn't seem to some people an unattractive bit of oakum picking or quarrying. In fact, there are fellows who'd pay out good money for all that, whereas you're getting paid for it."

"Yes, but not as much as you, Jimmy, not as much as you. What's become of Tommy Perkup now? You know, the little cross-eyed fellow that used to be with Associated Theatres. . . ."

Left alone in her suite at the New Cecil, Ida Chatwick found that she was almost too happy. It

was beginning to be frightening. Something awful would happen now at any moment and just sweep everything away. Then she would be back in Pondersley, and her father would pat her on the shoulder, sorry for her, but so maddening, and Aunt Aggie would cry, "Well, what did I tell you?" and go about in a sour triumph, and her younger sister Elsie would scream with laughter and tell all her silly friends. She would be told she'd "come a cropper." In Pondersley they were always grimly on the look-out for people coming a cropper. They never criticised you at all if you simply went creeping about, year after year, never trying to lift yourself out of the rut; but if you weren't satisfied and tried to make something out of your life, they made you pass through a fiery furnace of criticism. All eyes were on you, waiting for you to "come a cropper." Her father didn't often use this phrase; he liked to say, sucking his pipe in a very profound manner, that somebody or other "couldn't carry corn"; and Ida, lounging now on her rose-pink and grey settee in the New Cecil, remembered how puzzled she'd been as a child by that corn carrying, which sounded vaguely like something from the Bible and didn't seem at all suitable for that fat Mr. Johnson at the end of the street. Then there came to her a vivid recollection of baking day and new currant tea-cakes (a very little one for herself) and her mother's flushed face; and all this must somehow have been mixed up with "carrying corn." She was back again, very small, in that hot kitchen: the dough was rising in front of the fire; on the table were currants and raisins in thick blue bags,

and candied peel, off which you could pick bits of sugar; flour sprinkled on a board and a rolling pin; the door open on the chain; and her mother, her hair in front a bit floury, her pale thin face all rosy for once, getting very snappy, pushing her out of the way, grumbling about the heat and the bending down, wearing herself out for them when—as Ida realised now—she must have been a sick woman. She had died when Ida was twelve, and, try as she might, Ida could only think of her as somebody always overworked, tired and a bit cross and snappy. Ida knew now that there were still a lot of women in Pondersley like that, and that it wasn't fair. But of course it was largely they—poor creatures—who were so eager to see people "coming a cropper." If a girl tried to look smart, they were down on her at once. You had only to buy and use a bit of lipstick, and they began telling one another they'd seen you going off into the woods with one of the young commercials who sometimes stayed at the "Crown." You got a job up at Handshaw's, you stopped going to chapel, you looked smart, and very soon they were all saying that you went to Cleethorpes or Llandudno for week-ends with men. A few of the girls at Handshaw's did, and made no bones about what happened on those week-ends either, as Ida knew very well; but then she also knew that those girls were not the smartest (or of course the nicest), and that the really nice-looking smart ones, like Ida herself, were very particular indeed, and treated all but the most grovellingly respectful local swains with great disdain. Ida and her special friends knew what men were up to and after,

and were not having any, thank you.

It had needed a lot of courage on Ida's part to enter this beauty contest at all. Her father didn't like it, though being a mild little man and very fond of her, he had only shaken his head and looked rather wistful. Aunt Aggie, who kept house for them, had opposed it most vehemently and bitterly, from early morning until late at night. Elsie and Joe had laughed at her, of course—they *would*. Pondersley in general had disapproved and had foreseen a tremendous cropper on the way. But, as the family freely admitted, Ida could be very obstinate at times. She had fought hard to enter the first—and local—contest, which had resulted in her being named the beauty of the county. She had had to fight again—though this time she was not without allies—to enter the national contest and go up to London as the representative of her county. The works manager at Handshaw's had suddenly turned very pleasant, but then, not receiving the encouragement he felt was his due, had equally suddenly turned nasty and had told her that employees of the firm couldn't be given leave to parade themselves in London. So she had had to take the chance and throw away her job at Handshaw's. Now that she had won the first prize and had had her photograph in all the papers, had been given a marvellous silver rose and a hundred and fifty pounds, and had been told she would be tried for the films, Pondersley, it seemed, was very proud of her and announced that it had always known that she would become a famous beauty. Already people who had looked sideways at her for years were be-

ginning to write letters of congratulation. Well—let them. Ida would be glad to see her family and one or two friends again, but had finished with Pondersley, which could stick in the mud and go on waiting for its croppers, hers among them. She would never go back there, unless it was for an hour or two, arriving in a Rolls-Royce. And she saw herself—a film star now, sweet and kind, but—oh—so devastatingly beautiful, remote, bored—descending to make “a personal appearance” at the Electra, whose seats she filled in a second with an awe-struck audience of her acquaintances. “I must have been mad,” she made Sanderson, the works manager, say to himself, “to dream that a girl like that would ever have anything to do with me. I realise now,” he continued humbly, a very different man from the Sanderson the factory knew, “that this girl is—and has always been—far above me. I’ll never marry now, nor ever pester any of the factory girls again, I’ll just dream of *her*, worship her from afar.” For a moment after she had concluded this astonishing speech for Mr. Sanderson, she was serious, looking with wide eyes into the shining future, but the next moment there came to her a most vivid recollection of the actual Mr. Sanderson, his great red face, his hoarse bantering voice, and the contrast between this and the silly things she had just made him say were too much for her, and she giggled. “Oo, you are a fool, Ida Chatwick,” she told herself happily, in the best Pondersley style, and kicked her shoes off and drummed her stocking feet against the end of the settee.

“And to-night, I’m going to the *Cavendish*

*Theatre* and sitting in the biggest box with the young man who saved Utterton from being blown up, and we'll be photographed together, and everybody'll stare, and it'll be a lovely show, with Susie Dean in it, and then perhaps we'll all go to the *Café Pompadour* and dance to that band I used to hear on the wireless, and perhaps there'll be film producers and theatre managers there who'll say 'Look at that girl over there. I could make a star out of her,' and it's all going to be so grand I believe I'll be sick in a minute or something awful will happen and it won't come true."

That very morning she had acquired—at greatly reduced prices—a pale blue evening frock that jumped straight from the peg to fit her perfectly, new underclothes, stockings, shoes; and that very afternoon she had been given a complete and delicious outfit of beauty preparations, twenty magical little cases and bottles all waiting for her on her dressing-table. First, she would ring for tea, and then she would put all her things out on the bed, gloatingly, then examine all the beauty preparations and decide which to use, then have a long, long bath in water exquisitely cloudy with perfumed salts, get the barber to come up and reset her hair, and then spend a glorious hour dressing. Having sketched out this dazzling programme, she thought of all the things that might go wrong, from a fire in the hotel to her father being run over, and prayed hastily, but very sincerely, to be left alone for once, knowing only too well that there are innumerable little hostile powers at work in the universe and that our happiness depends upon their

forgetting us for a while.

Miss Chatwick might be only a poor provincial girl newly arrived in London, but after all she had won a beauty contest, and was probably easily the prettiest girl staying in the hotel, so that it is not surprising that she should be far less bashful and awkward in taking advantage of the hotel's resources than her fellow provincial and neighbour, Mr. Habble. She ordered tea without any hesitation, and bestowed upon the waiter who brought it a smile that immediately announced itself as being more than equal to a tip. While he was in the room, and indeed for a minute or two afterwards, she sat up as straight as a princess and looked only distantly aware of the fact that tea was about, but at the end of that minute or two, she pounced upon it, eagerly took stock of its varieties of sandwiches and cakes, like any greedy little girl from Pondersley. After that she curled up happily, bit into this and that, licked her fingers, and enjoyed a long imaginary conversation, very one-sided, with a girl called Muriel Pearson, who had been queening it over the other girls at Handshaw's for some time because she happened to be engaged to a very dashing young motor salesman.

It was not until much later, when she was actually beginning to dress, that the chambermaid arrived; not the usual one, who was thick, dark and had a moustache; but a strange one with red hair and a turned-up nose. She took Ida by surprise. When their eyes met, with something of a challenge between them, Ida had to make a quick decision. Should she enjoy the unusual pleasure of being

grand and bossy, or drop all that for the deeper satisfaction of having an intimate bit of chit-chat with another girl. Clearly, with this new chamber-maid, it had to be one or the other. For a second or two, silent, they peeped at one another through the eyeholes of masks. It was Ida's move. She decided for friendliness. For the last few days she seemed to have been talking to nobody but strange men.

"Oh, where's the one that usually comes here?" she enquired.

"That's Mrs. Savrony. It's her afternoon off."

"I see." Ida gave a short nervous laugh. She was rather frightened of this very self-possessed caroty chambermaid. "Look at this dress. It's awfully low at the back, isn't it? I've never worn one so low as this before. I suppose I'll have to powder right down my back."

"That's it. Do it for you if you like."

"Oh thanks ever so much."

"Aren't you the winner of this beauty competition?"

"Yes, how did you guess?"

"Well, I knew she was on this floor, and you're the only one I've seen who'd even be allowed to enter for a beauty competition, let alone win the first prize. What's it like? Does it make you feel you're an absolute knock-out for good and all?"

"No, I don't know that it does. Makes you a bit excited about yourself, of course," Ida answered confidentially. "Matter of fact, I think I was lucky getting it. Two of the girls—Miss Lancashire and Miss Devon—we were called after our counties, you

see—were really lovely, only I think they'd both overdone it with their hair—they were absolute knock-me-down blondes—and you see my hair isn't terribly interesting, but it's real and natural."

The chambermaid inspected her critically. "You're all right. Very pretty. Better than most I've seen in these competitions—at least, judging from the photos they put in the papers. If it was figure and skin and not just face, I'd go in for one myself. I've got a really good figure," she said, rather defiantly, "and I don't care who knows it."

"Yes, you have," said Ida. "Better than mine."

"As good, anyhow. A bit more devil in it, specially in the leg department. Here, I'll do your back. We're getting some turns in this place. There's you, and then just down the corridor there's that young fellow that's being cracked up as a hero."

"Oh, what's he like? And isn't it funny both of us being in this hotel and just near each other?"

"Not so funny if you know how they're trying to boom this hotel—do anything for a bit of advertisement. They'll never make it pay. But I'd have thought you'd have met that young fellow. You both seem to come from the same part, judging by your talk, and you're both being made a fuss of."

"I'm meeting him to-night. We're being taken to a theatre—in a box at the *Cavendish*. What's he like? Is he nice?"

"Yes, he's a nice enough young fellow. Looks a bit lost."

"Like me. I hope I don't look it, but I know I feel it."

"You'd make a good pair, then. He's a nice, clean-looking lad. Though I must say, if he can save a town, my young man ought to be able to save half England, for he'd make three of that chap and he's got a lot more about him. He's a policeman. And when I say he's a policeman, I don't mean he's one of your ordinary fat ignorant Bobbies. He's one of the new sort they get now. He'll be a sergeant soon and then an inspector. I'll see to that. You wait till we're married."

"Oh—are you getting married?"

"Yes—and it won't be long either. I'm sick and tired of cleaning up other people's messes when there's that great big chap of mine waiting for somebody to look after him. What about you?"

"No, I'm not engaged or anything, and I'm very glad too, because now that I've got this prize, they're going to try me for the films. I want to act in films. I want to be a film star," she concluded enthusiastically.

"I daresay you do," observed the chambermaid grimly. "Well, you can have it for me. I've looked after a few of your film stars, here and down at Brighton."

Ida was all attention now. "Oo—have you? Who?"

The chambermaid produced a few names. "Balmy little cats, half of 'em. One or two was nice, but they was real actresses, been on the stage for years. Mind you, I'd rather have any of them than the sort you generally get here—just rich women who've never done a stroke in their silly lives and loll about and think they're beautiful and keep you

on the run day and night. Talk about gold-digging. And the gold standard," she continued, somewhat wildly now. "If I'd my way, I'd put 'em off the gold standard. I'd make 'em all do a bit of work for a change, and then let some women who'd tired themselves out with work come here and be waited on hand and foot. Piccadilly, that's where half these women belong, and that's where they'd go if you took their money away from 'em."

"You're not a Bolshie, are you?" said Ida, awestruck by these stern sentiments.

"My chap always says I am, but I'm not. Leastways I don't think I am. I don't fancy Russians or any other sort of foreigners. This hotel's full of 'em and they only have 'em in these places because they're so smarmy—enough to make you sick. And then some of 'em—when you get 'em talking—are Bolshie enough for ten, just hate everybody they have to wait on. And the dirtiest devils—some of 'em—for ever trying it on with you. I've told some of these Marcells and Jeevannies what I thought about them, in my time—and wiped 'em across the jaw too. Here, how old are you?"

"Twenty-four."

"Where do you live and what do you do when you're at home?"

Ida told her.

"Why didn't your mother come with you on this job?" the chambermaid asked.

"I haven't got a mother—now. My Aunt Aggie lives with us. She's religious, and didn't want me to go in for the contest. I expect my father would have liked to have come—but he can't leave his work

—and, anyhow, I'm glad he didn't, because he wouldn't understand anything. And my sister and brother are younger than I am—and they're working—and anyhow I don't want *them*. Because I went in for this, they couldn't stop laughing at me—I had it served up every meal-time—but now it's them that's looking silly. Oh—I'm so excited. The theatre to-night—in the biggest box—and then afterwards I'm being taken to the *Café Pompadour*. Have you seen the silver rose they gave me, as part of the first prize? It's here. I'll show you. It's lovely. There—isn't it lovely? Wouldn't you be excited if you were me?"

The chambermaid looked at the silver rose, which was faintly tinged with colour from its reflection of the pink bedroom. Then she stared at the girl whose own colour was heightened and her eyes dyed a deeper shade of blue by her present excitement, so that she looked much prettier than she had done a few minutes before, when the chambermaid first entered the room. "I expect I would," said the chambermaid, smiling a little. "Being made such a fuss of. First visit to London and all. Have a good time. Take all they offer you. But listen—think of it as a holiday. Don't think of all this as a real sort of life. It isn't for anybody—and it certainly isn't for you. Say to yourself—this is going to last a week, a fortnight—and then I'm through. And when you're through, get clean out of it. Go back home. Don't bank too much on the pictures or anything else they put up to you. And listen—don't start sleeping with anybody unless you want to really badly."

"I shan't," cried the girl, scarlet. "I wouldn't if I did want to. And I wouldn't want to."

"Because it doesn't really get you anywhere," the chambermaid continued calmly, "not anywhere worth going. They'll certainly try it on. Quite soon, too. Men with hard bulging eyes, like acid drops, they're the worst—but they all want watching, unless they've got wedding ring all over 'em right from the first. Don't have any truck with the ones that say their wives won't divorce 'em. And just remember, this isn't real life, this isn't. I think I'll have to ask my other customer—our hero down the corridor—to keep his eye on you. If anything, he's a bit simpler than you are, but he's got a nice open look about him and his hair's on the red side, which is a good sign."

"No, you mustn't, please. I mean—I don't know him. Besides, it would make me look so silly, and I can look after myself all right."

"Well, you keep an eye on him then," said the chambermaid coolly. "And that might amount to the same thing. And now, miss, can I do anything more for you? Mrs. Savrony'll be on duty here again, in the morning. Thank you." And having said this in her official and impersonal tone of voice, the chambermaid then grinned, winked, and vanished.

For a few minutes Ida felt rather damped. She kept telling herself that after all the chambermaid hadn't won a beauty prize (and never would) and didn't really know any more about what happened to beauty prize-winners than she herself did. But the mere fact of being proffered advice at all at

such a time had a damping effect. That sort of talk belonged to the world she had so miraculously left behind. To have it here was almost as bad as going to the *Café Pompadour* and finding there, as grim mistress of the ceremonies, your Aunt Aggie. Ida felt annoyed now with the red-haired chambermaid, who, because she'd got engaged to a policeman, seemed to think she had to turn herself into a police-woman. When you came to think of it, she was rather a cheeky busybody, even if she had been friendly at first and had powdered your back. And then talking like that about sleeping with people! What did she think you were?

Neither the slight depression nor the annoyance lasted long. Ida looked at herself in the long mirror, and immediately the fairy tale started again. She was now left with the entrancing task of making herself even prettier still. She turned off all the lights except the two above the three-sided mirror on the dressing-table, and there she sat for the next ten minutes or so, in a dreamy ecstasy of creation, making her outward surface conform to some inward vision of herself that had haunted her for years. She was not thinking about other people and their admiration and applause; she was her own happy audience; the hotel, the city faded out of her mind; she was the enchanted princess in the tower.

She returned to the world to make a sketchy but aristocratic or film-starry sort of meal out of grapefruit and clear soup and wafers of toast. Mr. Gregory, very ugly with his thick glasses and sharp nose and with little hairs and dandruff all over the collar of his dinner-jacket, called to take her to the

*Cavendish Theatre.* He said at once that she looked grand, but showed no particular enthusiasm. It was difficult fitting Mr. Gregory into the fairy story: the best you could do was to give him a sort of gnome part. He had a most disconcerting grin, quite meaningless to Ida, who saw him as someone not quite real and human. She knew he had a wife, but could not imagine what she was like.

They arrived at the theatre a little after the appointed time. Some of the women had the loveliest opera cloaks. The men all seemed to be very tall, very red-faced too in contrast to their white waistcoats and white ties, and looked to Ida like generals and baronets. Though nobody took much notice of her at first, it was all terribly thrilling. Then in a sort of lounge place inside, all cream and gilt, they found the journalists and photographers; and now Ida was introduced to Mr. Hughson, a journalist like Mr. Gregory, but younger and cleaner, and to the young man who had done the brave deed, whose name was Charles Habble. And no sooner were they introduced than they had to stand together (he was only an inch or two taller than she was) and be photographed, with flash-lights going off almost in their faces. And then how everybody stared and whispered! Ida felt herself growing taller and prouder and more beautiful, though deep inside she was rather frightened too. The theatre manager himself, a man with a fine grey moustache and an eyeglass and a lovely white flower in his buttonhole, came to shake hands with them, and as soon as the photographers had their cameras and flash-lights ready again, he pre-

sented her with the largest box of chocolates she had ever had in her life. Then he escorted them down a thickly-carpeted corridor, with little doors on one side, and a programme-girl stood waiting at the last of these doors, which opened into a large box—just like a lovely little cream-and-gold sitting-room—and she and Mr. Habble sat in front, and there, spread mistily before them, was the great theatre filled with people and the band was playing a glorious tune and some of the audience upstairs began clapping and it was so wonderful that Ida felt funny shivers running up and down her back, had to dig her fingernails into her palms, and could easily have cried.

The two of them were alone in the box, and now she looked at him. Catching her glance, he gave her a quick, shamefaced grin. When she had first set eyes upon him, he had looked very clean and fresh, the black and white of his evening clothes throwing into relief his sandy hair and clear, greeny-blue eyes. It had been funny seeing him standing there, because he looked quite different from any of the men she had met in London. He reminded her of home at once; there were several fellows in Pondersley rather like him; he was the type you often found up that way; and this had not pleased her then, not because she was at all jealous, for she knew he had done something very brave and wonderful, but because she did not want to be reminded of home and resented being paired off, even for an hour or two, with somebody who contrived to share the glory but at the same time seemed to represent her father and Aunt Aggie and Hand-

shaw's and Pondersley. She had suddenly felt then that his being what he was just spoilt everything. Now, sitting with her in the box, he looked a lot less sure of himself. His face was red and his forehead glistening with sweat. He was embarrassed. He kept putting a finger between his neck and his collar. She smiled back at him. She remembered what the chambermaid had said about him, and knew at once that the chambermaid was right. He was nice.

He cleared his throat. "How d'you like all this then?" he enquired, in the homely accent she knew so well.

"Oh—I think it's lovely. Don't you?"

"Well—" he hesitated—"it's all right for you, of course."

"What do you mean—it's all right for me?"

"Well—" he gulped and then managed a grin—"I didn't win a beauty prize, y'know. I feel a fool and I bet I look one, too."

"No, you don't. And what do I look then?"

As the golden clusters of lamps began fading out and two white beam lights, which had been flickering uncertainly from somewhere near the roof, shot forward to illuminate every rich fold of the curtain, his voice came in reply, hoarse, earnest: "You look a knock-out."

These two children of our industrial civilisation sat rapt in their little darkened room hanging between floor and ceiling, nearly as lost and enchanted as Hansel and Gretel. The band leapt into new life, the curtain went sweeping up, and in a shop like a new paint-box a handsome young man, pretend-

ing to be a head salesman, flung himself along a dancing line of twenty athletic young women, all pretending to be shop assistants. Such behaviour did not astonish our two provincials, who had seen musical comedy before. Only now it began to look a little more like real life.

## 5

Charlie had said she was a knock-out, and he had meant it. Impossible to believe she had just come from Pondersley. There weren't such girls in Pondersley. No wonder she had got the first prize. A girl like this would get the first prize every time, anywhere. It was something to be sitting like this in the front of a box in one of the biggest theatres in London. But look who was sitting with him! Well, he'd better make the most of this one evening. She might have been in his class at one time—though that took a bit of believing—but from now on, it was certain he wouldn't be. If she didn't become a film star, then she'd marry some chap rolling in money. In a week or two, at the most, she'd have forgotten she'd ever set eyes on him. Who was he, anyhow? What was he doing there? He was only a fraud. But she wasn't a fraud. There was something to make a fuss about with her. The pick of England, she was, and quite right, too. And look at the style. They had probably togged and smartened her up here in London, just as they had togged and smartened him up, but what did that amount to with her? That was nothing. She might be a

Pondersley girl, who'd gone out to work there like any other, but obviously she was born for this West End sort of life, for jewellery and bare arms and theatre-boxes and big cars and the New Cecil Hotel. And for her sake he was glad such things existed. Why shouldn't she have them if she wanted them? A girl like this had a right to have everything she wanted.

This is what Charlie was saying to himself excitedly during the first half of the show. He kept his eyes on the stage, which was embarrassingly near, and enjoyed it all, but throughout he was never unconscious of her neighbouring presence. Though there was almost the width of the box between them, he could *feel* she was there, just as if there was a little warmth and weight of her on his left coat-sleeve. And he felt half drunk with excitement. He did not turn and look at her again until the curtain came down and the lights went up. Then they smiled at one another.

"Do you like it?" she asked.

Her voice was just right. She didn't talk in a loud, hard voice as a lot of these women did, nor, on the other hand, did she talk in a silly, whining style. No, her voice was just right. "Yes," he told her, "it's a good turn."

"I think it's lovely. I wish I could do something like this."

"Well, I expect you can if you want to."

"No, I'm going in for films."

"You ought to be good."

"Oh—do you think so?"

"Yes, I do," he declared stoutly. "And I often go

to the pictures. As soon as I saw you, I said to myself: 'I'll bet she'll do well on the pictures.' Honestly I did."

She rewarded him with a dazzling smile not unlike a good many he had seen in films. Nay—damn it—it was like being in a film being here with her.

She stood up. He got up, too, and suddenly felt very hot and awkward in his stiff shirt and collar. "Oughtn't we to go to the manager's room," she said. "That's what I was told. We'd to go up at the interval."

A programme-girl came to take them up to Mr. Brale's room, which was filled with smoke, drinks, and male and female representatives of the Press. There they were photographed again. Two determined women began interviewing the girl. Hughson, who seemed to have had a good many drinks, took charge of Charlie.

"What are you drinking, Habble?" he asked, waving a hand towards the table.

"Lemonade for me," said Charlie firmly. "I see there is some."

"There is," replied Hughson sadly, "but I don't know that Brale will like you drinking it. It's been here a long time. Stagnant too, you see. Now the whisky's fresh and in a clear, running stream. No? Why?"

"I'm having excitement enough without trying whisky. If I start drinking, I'll be cock-eyed in no time."

"Quite right. One of us must be sober. Hello, Jimmy. Come and be introduced to our *Tribune* hero. Charles Habble. Jimmy Busk."

"And what do you think of our little show, Mr. Habble?"

Charlie told him, and after some encouragement from Mr. Busk and one or two of the others standing round, he gave them his views on entertainment in general. He noticed that several of them, like Hughson, had had a good deal to drink already, and some of them were not carrying their liquor as well as the gay young gentleman from the *Tribune*. One fellow, long-haired, unshaven, and dressed in a dirty, high-necked brown sweater, was leaning against the wall, his eyes half closed, and holding the hand of a bold-faced, piggy young woman in a very tight green jumper. "I don't know what they're paid to do," he told himself grimly, "but I know what they will be doing before so long if they're not careful." One of the two females who had pinned Miss Ida Chatwick into a corner was the fat woman who had asked him about his love life, yesterday in the hotel. The atmosphere in this room was not unlike that of the "Blue Bell" in Utterton at closing time on Saturday night. He told Hughson so.

"But the difference is, you see, Habble, that whereas we're earning our living here, the poor fools in Utterton are spending theirs. Not that this is really a free pub, though it looks it. Sooner or later, we've got to pay for these drinks—but in words, words, words, as Hamlet says. I'm one of those young men who, as soon as they get a little tight, begin seeing themselves as Hamlet. An insufferable type."

"I'll tell you one thing." And Charlie looked sternly at him. "After this, I don't know that I'm

going to take so much notice of the papers as I used to."

"You'll probably take even less notice of them before we've finished with you. If they're cooked in kitchens like this, you're not sure you fancy the dinner—that it? But I think you're wrong there. It's when we're sober we do the mischief. But tell me—talking of mischief—how d'you like your girl friend?"

"You mean that one? She's no girl friend of mind," I wish to God she was," Charlie concluded earnestly.

"Not a bad little thing."

"Not a bad little thing! Well, all I can say is she knocks spots off anybody I've seen in London. There's nobody in this theatre to touch her, nor in that hotel either."

"My dear chap, what's this? Local patriotism or love at first sight?"

"Nothing o' the sort," said Charlie hastily. "But I'm telling you. Damn it—you can see for yourself."

"In these matters, nobody can see for himself. But let's go and rescue her from those two bloated vampires, who look like procuresses and write like 'em. Don't be afraid to introduce me. I know I'm devilish fascinating, especially when in liquor—when I instantly become the fatal Beau Hughson—but my heart's not free. I'm a victim of unrequited love, and if I have three more whiskies to-night somebody'll have to hear about it. So you can safely introduce me."

"I can't. You've already been introduced—when she first came in, before the show started."

"Quite right. I'd forgotten. Well, we can rescue her from those monsters and have a little chat."

"Well, mind what you're saying."

But Hughson didn't, as Charlie might have known. He looked long, hard and solemnly at the girl, then said: "Miss Chatwick, speaking as a representative of a great newspaper, the *Daily Tribune*, I'm afraid I can't allow our pet hero, Mr. Charles Habble, who has been placed in my charge, to fall in love with you."

"Here, steady on," cried Charlie.

"I have no objection to it myself. But it is a question of editorial policy. I should have to refer the matter to my editor, who would, of course, have to consult with the editor of the *Morning Pictorial*, who can, I believe, now talk—though, of course, only in words of one syllable."

"Hughson—" called a voice from somewhere, "you're tight."

Charlie was afraid that the girl would be furiously angry. But if she was, she was very clever in concealing it. "Whatever have you been saying to him?" she cried, quite gaily, to Charlie. Before he had time to reply, however, they were hustled out of the room and down the stairs to their box.

"You mustn't take any notice of that chap Hughson," Charlie told her, when they arrived at the box. "He's a nice lad, but he'll say anything for tuppence."

"Oh no, he won't." And there was Hughson. "Not for tuppence. He wants good union rates of pay. I'll say anything—but not for tuppence."

He said no more, but settled down quietly at the

back of the box. There he went to sleep and the combined efforts of the chorus and orchestra could not wake him. Now and again Charlie and the girl looked round to see how he was getting on, and then seeing him still asleep, they smiled at one another and felt very friendly and confidential. The show came to an end. Then they found Hughson, looking quite wide-awake and alert, clapping with them. "I was dreaming that I was boiling a lot of eggs somewhere out in Manchukuo," he told them. "I was wearing a coat with a fur collar. I can still feel that fur. It was more real than this. Queer, isn't it? Or is it? They were little brown eggs."

It was all over now. "It's been lovely," sighed the girl. Then she added briskly: "And now we're going to the *Café Pompadour*, aren't we?"

"Are we?" said Hughson vaguely. "Who says so?"

"That little man with the brown eyes—you know—Mr. Busk."

"Then if he says so, we're going. He does their publicity."

"Where's Mr. Gregory?"

"He seems to have returned to his wife and little ones in his distant suburb," said Hughson. "But here's Jimmy Busk. Now then, James—what orders?"

"Greg's gone. Would you mind taking them along to the *Pompadour*?" He produced a card and wrote across it. "Show 'em this. I've fixed up a table for you. Be with you in about half an hour. All right, Hughson?"

"All right, James. This way, my children. We'll

slip out this way and so avoid the crowd. We can't be public figures all the time, can we?"

In the taxi, which moved slowly through a London that was like a vast glittering fancy fair, Charlie became curious about this café. "What is it?" he asked. "What's the idea?"

"The idea," Hughson explained, "is the achievement of the impossible. As you know very well, my little ones, nobody has any money nowadays. Now the silly men who've organised the *Café Pompadour* don't believe this. Well, what have they done? They've rigged up this place so that it charges you a lot of money to sit down at a table, it charges you still more to eat, and still more to drink. In order to stay in there at all, you've to let it snow pound notes on them. The result is that these silly men only make a little profit of about nine hundred per cent."

"Well, I don't see where the money comes from," said Charlie.

"Neither do I. And nobody's going to show us where it comes from either. But the rich seem to be always with us."

"Why," said Miss Chatwick, rather timidly, "why do they call it the *Café Pompadour*?"

"Atmosphere, partly. And then again, it's a question of ideals," Hughson continued, with the gusto of a man who is talking for his own enjoyment rather than that of his listeners. "When they think of Madame de Pompadour, they all feel inspired, and add another ten bob to the cover charge, fake the champagne labels, and water the whisky again."

"I've heard the band on the wireless," said the girl dreamily. "It's lovely."

"A good band. The experts tell me it's the best in town. But, of course, you hear it much better on the wireless than you will in the café itself. There you really only *see* the band. And they're not much to look at."

"It beats me why anybody goes at all—according to you," said Charlie shrewdly. "Why are you coming here yourself? We could have waited for that chap to bring us. Not that I don't want you here, y'know. But you see what I mean?"

"I see it with devastating clarity. The answer is, I'm coming along partly because I'm curious to see what you make of it, and partly because I like eating and drinking for nothing in a place where people are paying a lot for the privilege, and partly because I don't want to go home to bed yet. And that last reason applies to a good many of the other people, too."

"Oh—I know what you mean," cried the girl. "I've felt it many a time. But where I live everybody *always* wants to go home to bed."

"Quite. Well, down here a lot of us don't. We're frightened of going home to bed. We set out to make an evening of it, hoping to meet on the way the immortal realities—love, friendship, laughter, beauty, wisdom. If not one of them turns up, we stay on and on, in the hope that they will. To go home to bed is to acknowledge defeat. The night clubs, the fashionable dancing places and cabarets, these are our last resorts in every meaning of the term. And there you have it."

"I don't know," said Charlie slowly, "that I exactly understand what you're talking about. But you're not going to tell me that's the reason these places do so well."

"No, it's simply because a lot of rich, fashionable fools want to go to a place where they know they'll see a lot of other rich, fashionable fools. And here it is."

The place was much smaller than Charlie had imagined it would be, but what it lacked in size it made up for in crowding, heat, smoke, and noise. Talk about closing-time on Saturday night at the "Blue Bell"! Not in it. They nearly had to fight to get to the little table that had been kept for them. There wasn't room to move, there wasn't room to breathe. One smell rose above all the other smells, and Charlie puzzled for a moment or two over it before he discovered what it was—the smell of women's powder, which was all about them, nearly as thickly laid on the scene as flour dust in a flour-mill: chalky faces, chalky arms, chalky shoulders. The din was terrific. The band was playing, but you could hardly hear it. The noise was chiefly made up of screaming voices, women letting go. In the centre, not far from their table, the people were supposed to be dancing, but Charlie, who had done his share at socials and the like, had never seen such dancing before. There they were, so densely packed they could only hold one another close and waddle and bump: old men with girls clamped to their stomachs; big fat women with pale young men anchored to their bosoms. It was like a lot of strange people, badly assorted, all courting on a big,

messy scale. Up in Bendworth and Utterton they had to go down dark lanes to do this, and even then the girls had some clothes on, the fresh air was blowing round them, and they didn't fill themselves up with drink all the time either. Some bits of food were dumped on the table by one of the pasty-faced, clammy waiters, who all looked as if another two hours of this would kill them. There was a bottle of wine in a bucket for Ida Chatwick and him, and Hughson was busy again with the whisky. The dancing stopped, all the people disentangling themselves and returning to their tables, which were so close together that now Charlie seemed to be surrounded, hemmed in, with bare backs, and one woman with short grey hair and a tremendous nose, immediately behind, nearly deafened him with her screaming. He glanced across at Ida, expecting to see her looking disgusted; but no, she was staring about, proud and happy, her eyes brighter than ever. Charlie came gloomily to the conclusion that there was some attraction about the place that he had missed, being just an ordinary sort of chap. He tried to feel happier about it.

"I don't say I'm good at it," he warned her, "but I can dance a bit. Would you like to have a shot at it next time?"

"I should think I would," she cried, with enthusiasm. "I wish they'd hurry up and play again."

"That's right," said Hughson in his best paternal manner. "Dance away, my children. Papa Hughson will be waiting here for you, behind the whisky. But have some champagne before you plunge into

that mass hugging. Here's Jimmy Busk to keep me company."

With a girl like this in his arms—and a very snug armful she made, too—Charlie found it much pleasanter being one of the waddling mob in the middle than being an onlooker. He was a bit too anxious to enjoy himself properly, being terrified that he might do something silly—he couldn't decide what—that would make the pair of them look like fools. As for the girl, she was loving it all right. She looked grand, too. A lot of people had a good stare at her. Some of them looked at him, too. There was a bit of whispering about them. As his anxiety lessened, his pride increased. There wasn't a girl on the floor, for all their paint and powder and fine clothes and diamonds, that could compare with the one he'd got. Well, he'd better make the most of it. He held her a bit tighter and she peeped at him out of huge, misty blue eyes. It was fine, but all the same he'd rather be walking home with her arm-in-arm from the pictures in Utterton or Pondersley. Altogether too much public hugging and jigging here; too much smelly powder and chalkiness; too much hot, smoky air; too much cackling and screaming and staring. Not good enough for a girl like this.

This time, when the dancing stopped, and they returned to the table to find some more bits of food going cold on it, a piano was pushed forward in front of the band and a bright light was focused on it. Immediately, at the next table, three women and two young men, swollen pallid young men who looked as if they had only just been partly rescued

from drowning, began clapping and screeching at one another like five lunatics. A man in evening dress strolled in and sat down at the piano. There was a lot of clapping and screeching then. He had dark curly hair like a negro, a curious yellow face, and an American accent. Rolling his black eyes at all the nearest women, he sang two songs in a soft, artful sort of voice. Each of these songs had three jokes in it, and it was the same joke each time—and a bit bluer than anything Charlie had ever heard before in mixed company. But every time the good old dirty joke arrived, the women screamed with laughter, clapped eagerly, and watched that impudent rolling eye. The girl from Pondersley, Charlie noticed, didn't laugh; she half frowned, half smiled in a vague sort of way, as if she didn't quite know what to make of it; which pleased Charlie.

"He's clever, y'know," said Mr. Busk.

"He may be clever, Jimmy," said Hughson, "but for all that, he's also a dirty, conceited, damned impudent, doped half-caste who ought to be back where he belongs. The very sight of him and his admirers makes me sick."

"Hear, 'ear!" cried Charlie. "And, I say, why is it the women all laugh and clap him louder than the men?"

"It's a long story, Habble," replied Hughson. "Far too long. But you're right—they do."

"Well, I don't like him much," said the girl, "though I expect he's very clever. Who's this?" For the half-caste gentleman had now been allowed to go, and in his place was a very thin girl with short

hair and enormous hollow eyes. She looked as if she was about to be very tragic.

"Ah—this kid's cleverer still," Mr. Busk remarked complacently. "Big new success."

"Well, I hope she's got a big new joke," Hughson murmured.

But she hadn't. She had a grating little voice, which she managed very cunningly, in her first song, to tell them how desolate and forsaken she was now that her sweetie had gone away. This piece of sentiment was to the taste of both Ida and Charlie, who were among the first to applaud the girl. Her next two songs were comic, however, and the one joke returned and stayed, to the delight of the audience, to whom it seemed to be forever new and fresh, a happy discovery. When she had done, the girl produced a tiny smile, coughed once or twice, looked at them out of her enormous hollow eyes, and then very slowly walked out.

"Got a touch of t.b.," said Mr. Busk casually, "that's her trouble—poor kid. And she's trying to make a lot of money while the going's good. Overdoing it, I should think. Well, what about meeting some people?"

The lights were up again, the band was stirring. More bits of food descended upon the table. Ida and Charlie drank some more champagne. Mr. Busk struggled through the neighbouring crowd with the manager, a most polite and smiling foreign gentleman, who kissed Ida's hand, to her astonishment, embarrassment and dawning delight. Charlie found his own hand being shaken hard by a large purple gentleman with an eyeglass, the tattered

stump of a cigar, and a tremendous smell of brandy, who said: "Proud to meet you, young fella, proud to meet you. I'm tight. We're all tight, aren't we?"

"Yes," replied Hughson promptly.

"Very well, sir. What of it? What the devil of it? I can still be proud to meet a young fella who's— who's—done so much. An' the lovely little lady. Your wife, young fella? Pity. By God!—young fella—you're a hero. So am I. Only I'm tight."

After that it got very confusing. Sometimes the large, purple gentleman was there, still shaking Charlie by the hand, sometimes he wasn't. Mr. Busk kept popping up like a little round jack-in-the-box. He brought new people with him; or at least, new people came. The most forceful of them was called Lady Catterbird, a middle-aged woman, glittering with jewels, with a face like a white-washed parrot, an eye you could not escape, and a voice that mastered the pandemonium. She appeared to be very rich and important, had read all about Charlie, and made a great fuss of him. So far as he could gather anything, he gathered she was inviting him to a party, a cocktail party, she was giving the next day. She wedged herself close to him, completely ignoring Ida, who, however, had her own admirers. When the large purple gentleman was there, he was between Charlie and Hughson (with whom he seemed to be conducting a fantastic argument), and in that space there was not room for a man of that size. So it was all very crowded and confusing, still hotter and noisier, and with the atmosphere of a super-de-luxe Saturday night closing-time.

Suddenly, Charlie had had quite enough of it. He felt if he didn't get out at once, he'd burst. He looked across at Ida Chatwick, and was sure that she had had enough of it too. He stood up decisively. Mr. Busk said that he would look after Hughson, who was now busy knocking upon the gigantic shirt-front of the large purple gentleman. Two minutes later, Charlie and Ida climbed into the pleasant cool gloom of a taxi.

"Well," Charlie began, "I shan't want to go there again for a long long time. Bad enough when you get it all for nothing, but what it must be like when you've got it to pay for, I can't imagine. And did you notice what some of 'em were paying out? Handfuls o' pound notes, enough to keep a dozen families for a week. Quids and quids. Y'know, it makes you think a bit, that does."

A curious noise came from her corner. He listened. There it was again. She was crying—not good and hard, only very softly—but still, crying.

"Here, I say—what's the matter? Is anything up? You're crying, aren't you?"

"Yes," she sniffled. "I'm silly. It's nothing. Honest, it's nothing. I don't know why I started weeping like that. Must have been excitement and drinking all that wine and then feeling so tired all at once—just set me off. I don't usually cry, y'know," she added defiantly.

"Course you don't," said Charlie, like a sturdy old friend.

"It's just to-night—gone to my head, I suppose."

And then he could hear her sniffing and nose-blowing. He would have liked to have taken her

hand and squeezed it hard, but he daren't. He wanted to console her, make a fuss of her, but did not know how to start.

"I'll tell you what," he said finally. "I'll bet you'll have no trouble getting on in pictures or theatres or whatever it is. In my opinion, there wasn't a girl in that theatre—on the stage or in the audience—who came near you, and there wasn't in that café place either."

"Oh—but there were some lovely girls," she began protesting faintly.

"I dare say, I dare say. But nobody in your class. Don't you worry. You're a knock-out."

"I'll bet if you could have a good look at me now, you wouldn't think so." And the girl began doing her face up. "But I'll tell you something now, Mr. Habble. I think you're very very nice."

After a thrilling pause: "Do you remember the Albion football team at Pondersley? Well, I used to play against them, when I was with Bendworth."

"Oh—you come from Bendworth really, do you?"

"That's right. Know it?"

"My uncle used to be there one time. He used to keep a draper's down Milbury Road. I went to stay there once."

"Nay, did you? Milbury Road. Well, I'll be hanged. Fancy you staying in Milbury Road. What did they call your uncle?"

But the end was not romantic. They arrived triumphantly at the hotel, triumphantly because, after a desperately anxious moment, Charlie was able to decide upon a sum that seemed to satisfy

the taxi-man; but once inside, he noticed that she looked very white.

"What's up?"

"That ice-cream I had," she gasped, "and all that wine—and those cigarettes—and excitement. Oh—I think I'm going to be sick." And, after giving him one agonised glance, she hurried away. There was nothing more to be done or said. The evening was over. He went wearily to his rooms, far more tired than he usually was after a hard day's work, and much lower in spirit. There was a nasty, ashy taste in his mouth, and his head ached, as if the morning after had already dawned inside him. He didn't suppose that girl—now being sick somewhere not far away—would ever want to see him again. He was very nice, she'd said. Thought him a hero, like the rest of them. Well, if he was a quarter the fellow he was supposed to be, he'd go straight to her and tell her something. But then he wasn't, and the sooner he stopped thinking about her the better. This had been his day, and he'd had it. All that was left was this nasty taste in his mouth.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### A HERO'S LIFE

#### 1

THE next three days were a queer jumble of adventures for Charlie. Afterwards he found it hard to unravel the tangle of them, partly because when the meeting came and brought with it the climax, all the events before dwindled and so seemed more confused. What he did know only too well was that he did not share this muddle of days with the girl, Ida Chatwick. Though their rooms were on the same floor of the same hotel, he saw her only twice, and actually talked to her only once during this period. He was busy and so was she; a pair of lively little puppets. Sir Gregory had suddenly decided that there should be a big preliminary meeting, on behalf of his scheme for a League of Imperial Yeomen, this coming Sunday evening, and that Charlie should make an appearance on the platform; so the *Tribune* kept the limelight turned on him. Every day there was at least a column about his adventures in London, largely invented by Hughson. The *Tribune* staff was busy finding things for him to do that would bring him to the notice of increasingly large sections of the public. He received more and more letters, so many that he had given up reading them. People were always calling at the hotel to see

him, though few of them succeeded. One of them did, however, on Friday morning, when he was taking it easy after his late night, and a most terrifying fellow this caller was, too. His visit was one of the events that easily separated itself from the general muddle. It had a nasty trick of returning to Charlie's memory afterwards.

Most of the people who wanted to see him gave their names and addresses to the young men at the desk downstairs, who then telephoned up to Charlie's room, if he was in, and then Charlie announced firmly that he did not want to be seen, and that was that. But not this chap. He simply arrived. The door flew open and in he marched, a very erect old gentleman with a thick thatch of white hair, a brown shaven face, and sharp little eyes. "Mr. Habble, isn't it? Good. They told me below I'd find you here." Not a word about ringing up and giving his name; a very masterful old gentleman this was. Now he sat down in an arm-chair opposite Charlie, sat bolt upright, with his hands on his knees, and looked hard at Charlie, who could feel those eyes boring into him like gimlets.

"My name is Colway-Peterson. It is probably known to you."

Charlie shook his head. He would have liked to have asked the old gentleman what he wanted, but simply dare not do it.

"I am a scientist and a political philosopher. I have written several books and many pamphlets. I have contributed largely to the more intelligent Press. And the more intelligent Press does not in-

clude the *Daily Tribune*, in which I seem to have been making your acquaintance these last few mornings. It is a detestably vulgar and inaccurate publication, but I read it in the hope of understanding something of the vagaries and the vacillations of what is sometimes called, hopefully, the public mind. At the moment, young man—thanks to the idiotic attentions of the *Daily Tribune*—you have an existence in that public mind."

Here he stopped. Charlie could not think of any adequate remark to make, but something was evidently expected of him, so finally, after giving a modest little cough, he said: "Quite so."

"Whether you deserve so much notice is another matter," said Mr. Colway-Peterson sharply. "I don't wish to appear offensive, but from what, no doubt, was a too hasty reading, it did seem to me that they displayed a disproportionate enthusiasm. In fact—to be quite candid—I found it difficult to gather what exactly you did do." And he looked expectantly at Charlie.

"Look here," said Charlie, very much on the defensive at once, "I've not been saying I've done anything very wonderful, y'know. I've never pretended it was."

"Indeed. Well, that's something. But what did you do? Forgive this persistence, but as the *Daily Tribune* asks me to admire you and rather strangely omits any exact account of what you did to be admired, I feel there is some excuse for persistence."

It was awful. Charlie felt that he was back at school again. This was a terrible old gentleman. "Well, that's not quite right," he stammered.

"They did write something about it—the first morning."

"Certainly they did. You mistake my meaning. I gather that you extinguished—or helped to extinguish—a fire that had broken out in your works, and that as you were surrounded by explosive, or at least highly combustible material, any further extension of the fire might have brought the whole town into immediate danger. Isn't that so?"

"That's right," replied Charlie uneasily.

"Very well. You put out a fire and no doubt saved many lives and much damage. But surely people are putting out fires and thus saving life and property every day? What were the special circumstances here that compelled the journalists to describe you by that appalling term *Wonder Hero*? I read yesterday morning, for instance, that what you did should restore our faith, supposing it to be in need of repair, in British manhood. Now do not mistake me, Mr. Habble. You look to be a good specimen of the sanguine Nordic type. It would not surprise me to learn that you had lately performed the most astonishing feats. But I am a man of science as well as a philosopher, and I delight always in a solid substratum of facts. I read these astonishing statements about you, Mr. Habble, and ask myself what the facts are. Are there here, I ask myself, some special circumstances, and if so, what are they?"

Charlie did not like this at all. "I suppose the only special circumstances, as you call 'em, was that if there'd have been a big fire, the whole town might have gone up in the air. As I said before, I don't

pretend to have done anything very wonderful. Blame the paper, don't blame me."

"Very well. I blame the paper. Clearly if so much is to be written about any prompt, sensible action of that kind, if any conscientious young workman is to be praised as a national hero, the Press is going to addle our brains more than ever. Consider what a waste of precious space and attention." He leaned forward and his eyes spired as far as Charlie's backbone. "What about your responsibilities? I mean, your responsibilities as a man upon whom the attention of a very large section of the public is temporarily focused."

"What about 'em?"

"What about them? Think, man, think." Here Mr. Colway-Peterson rose to his full height, which topped Charlie's by several inches. "You have an existence in the mind of that large public. It is actively aware of you. I—Colway-Peterson—have no such existence, and it is not aware of me. But for thirty years I have been working for the benefit of those people. I have given my days and nights to scientific-political-economic research on their behalf. You put out a fire and save a few lives. But I am ready to put out a million fires and save a million lives—nay, sir, more, far more. The fires I can put out are those in bodies deficient in the essential vitamins. The lives I can save are those of our people who may soon die of starvation, though all that is needed to maintain them in health, in perfect health, lies about them neglected. I have devoted thirty years to these problems of diet. Very soon my name will rank higher among the im-

mortals of dietetic science than those of McCullum, Funk, Holst and Frolich, Hess, Steenbock, Goldberger, Evans. Great men, all of them. Are you a great man, my friend?"

"No," replied Charlie very promptly.

"Well said, well said. At the present time, I am on the track—of what? Of a new vitamin, you will reply. No," he shouted, to Charlie's horror, "not of one new vitamin, but of *three*. Three. Realise, my friend, what that means. And that is not all, by no means. What is happening in this country of ours? We are living on imported foodstuffs."

Here Charlie was on firmer ground. He gave a hasty assent.

"And these same imported foodstuffs are not only imperilling our national credit and security, but are also endangering our very lives. We're ruining ourselves to poison ourselves. I'll let you think about that for a moment, my young friend." At which he swung away and then carefully examined one of the engravings on the wall. Charlie sat still, said nothing, but felt very foolish.

Mr. Colway-Peterson now turned sharply, looked at Charlie as if he had caught him in the act of picking his pocket, and said accusingly: "You consume tinned stuff, frozen meat, white flour, don't you?"

Charlie admitted that he did.

The old gentleman laughed bitterly. "Of course you do, and so does nearly everyone else in this idiotic island. And we pay heavily for them, too, don't we? Pay heavily for the privilege of robbing ourselves of necessary vitamins. We'd be better off chewing straws."

"What have we got to eat then?"

"We've got to eat and drink what the good God intended the English to eat and drink. We've got to eat and drink England—and not frozen New Zealand, tinned South America, and all the starch of Canada. Give me the power, and in ten years I will make this a self-supporting country filled with the healthiest population in the world. Milk, vegetables, fish, fruit. We can keep cows here, can't we? We can grow carrots, cabbages, and lettuces. We can catch fish. We can plant orchards. This is the question I've thought about, day and night, for thirty years. And I have fed myself, with my own produce, as I propose that other people should feed themselves. Nothing wrong with me, is there? Hale, hearty, eh? And I'm seventy-two."

"Well, you don't look it, I must say," said Charlie, anxious to pacify this terrifying old gentleman.

"You are right, I don't. I'm healthier this minute than you are. Take a good look at yourself in the glass. Look at your skin and those pouches under the eyes. And you're a young man, a mere baby."

"I was up late last night," Charlie muttered.

"So was I. And up early this morning. But now I come to the real purpose of my visit. You are—and I must say that I cannot see exactly why—at this moment in the public eye. It is an eye that can only observe a few things or persons at a given time. Now, thanks to the *Daily Tribune*, it is observing you. I think—and I hope you will agree—that it should be observing *me*."

"Looks like it, doesn't it?" Charlie ventured cautiously.

"Looks like it! My dear young man, at the most you possibly saved a few people from being blown up, and as things are going now, they might as well have been blown up. What can I do? I can *save this country*—save its health, its purse, its self-respect. And for four years now I have been trying to make myself heard in the popular Press. I have been laughed at as a crank. I have endured insults. You are now in the public eye, the public mind. I ask you to turn that eye, that mind, to me. If you do that, you will have the satisfaction of knowing that you have put this idiotic fuss to the best possible use that could be made of it. Simply say 'I have met a man who can save this country. His name is Colway-Peterson. He has been neglected, ignored, too long.' Enough. Our time is valuable. Here is my card, and here are one or two pamphlets. I wish you good day, young man. You have given me a courteous hearing."

And out he marched, as rapidly and decisively as he came, leaving Charlie staring at the pamphlets in his hand and with the most extraordinary mixture of feelings. The very next time he saw Hughson, he mentioned this Colway-Peterson and described his visit, but Hughson merely laughed: "What—that old crank! He's been pestering us for years. There are dozens of those old bores always trying to get us. Vanity, my boy, vanity. They don't seem to understand that unless they do something particularly daft or outrageous, they're not news."

That was that. But Charlie had his own secret reasons for not forgetting that encounter. For the next few days, at odd times when he was feeling

rather uneasy, the towering figure returned, and those sharp little eyes went boring into him again.

## 2

Later that same day, Friday, Charlie went to his first (and last) cocktail party. This was the one that had been mentioned to him the night before by that rich, important, masterful woman with a face like a whitewashed parrot, Lady Catterbird. Charlie had not the least desire to set eyes on her again, but she was determined to get him to her party. The *Tribune* was on her side, too, partly because she was a friend of the proprietor, and partly because an appearance at one of her parties would be good publicity. She was, it seemed, well known for her parties. So Charlie went. He hoped that the beauty prize girl would be there, but he didn't give much for his hope. This Lady Catterbird didn't seem very enthusiastic about good-looking young women.

Her house was in the corner of a large square, not very far from the hotel. It was about the size of the Utterton Central Free Library, Public Swimming-Baths, and Gas and Rates Offices. At the door were two tall young fellows in uniform. There were two more of them at the foot of the grand staircase and another at the top. After that you came to the waiters, and there seemed to be dozens of them. The party was happening on the first floor. When you got to the top of the stairs you could hear it happening, and when you were nearer, walking along the broad landing, it was deafening. The

screaming and screeching were terrible. Charlie asked himself why all the people in the West End of London seemed to scream and screech, men and all. Lady Catterbird was standing at the door of the big room and she recognised Charlie at once, which seemed to him very clever of her.

"Welcome, welcome," she shouted, keeping hold of his hand. "So splendid of you. I'm dying, absolutely dying, to have a really long talk with you, only, of course, one can't with all these people. Now will you—promise me—will you just go in and meet people and have a good time and *not* go, just wait until we're able to have a cosy little talk together? Now promise."

Charlie, anxious to have his hand back, found himself muttering some sort of promise. Then he was allowed to enter the big room, which was about the size of the Bendworth Museum and Art Gallery. They were all drinking from little glasses, eating sandwiches and bits of things, smoking, and screaming at one another. Charlie pushed his way through, having made up his mind to reach the far corner. On the way he drank a cocktail and didn't much care for it. He realised at once, too, that if he drank many of those things he'd be squiffy. Some of these people were well on already. He landed near a girl with a long white face, like a horse, and she blinked at him and then said in a gruff voice: "My God! Surely you're Archie Clavordale?"

"No, I'm not," said Charlie.

"No, you're not, are you? My God!—you're like him. D'you mind?"

"No," said Charlie, moving on, telling himself

that if that girl had only a few more she'd soon be in a terrible state—my God she would. He was now brought up against three men, two of them young and slender and pale, and the other one older and plumper and pink, and all three of them were hissing amiably at one another and smiling and swaying and waving their delicate white paws.

"And sssso I ssssaid to him, 'Darling, it'ss perfectly abssssurd—you know it issss,'" one of the young men was saying; and the other two smiled sweetly, with their heads slightly on one side, and looked as if at any moment they were going to kiss him. Charlie worked his way round this group as soon as he could. This move sent him up against the bulging waistcoat of a very fat man with a very red face. He had a cocktail in each hand and insisted upon giving Charlie one. "Drink that," he said, with a hoarse chuckle, "and take that disgusted look off your face. Where d'you come from?"

"Utterton," said Charlie.

"Never heard of it. What are you doing here?"

"I don't know."

"I know what I'm doing," cried the fat man in despair. "I'm wrecking my evening. By quarter-past seven, at the latest, I'll be three parts tight, reeking of gin, sticky with vermouth, no appetite left, and with the rest of the hellish evening to fill in. I think I shall ride about on buses. Crouch End—Penge—that sort of thing. Gunnersbury. Shooters Hill. Do you know any of these places?"

"No. I've only just come to London."

"I wish I had," said the fat man sadly. "They've built most of the place round me. But not Penge or

Gunnersbury. Ah—there you are, Rose.” And he brushed past Charlie, who began to look for some place to put down his half-empty glass. This search brought him to a small table, at which sat two young girls, tall and quite pretty creatures, who were sedately picking over a lot of little things to eat set out on trays. He put his glass down on this table, and in doing so accidentally knocked against one of these damsels. He muttered some sort of apology.

“Not at all,” she said in a very clear, precise voice, looking at him with very clear grey eyes. “Are you a boxer?”

“No,” Charlie replied, astonished at this question. “I mean to say—I can box a bit—but I’m not a proper boxer.”

“What a shame! Darling,” she turned to the other girl, “he’s not a boxer. And he looks like one.”

“He talks like one, too. At least, I imagine so,” said the other miss, with the same astonishing air of quiet impudence. “I’m sorry you lost that point, darling.”

“What are you then—a comedian?” asked the first girl.

“I’ve seen his face before,” said the second.

“You’ve not gate-crashed, have you?”

“What’s that?” asked Charlie, bewildered.

“Darling, he’s just trying to make it hard for us. I’m sure he’s a famous comedian. I believe I’ve seen him in films.”

“Did Lady Catterbird really invite you?”

“Yes, she did,” said Charlie, trying to keep his end up with this pair of impudent chits. “And I’m not a comedian either.”

"She must have invited him just to make it difficult for us, darling," the second one sighed. "And I really do know his face."

"So do I. He must be a celebrity, or he wouldn't be here. Besides, nobody but a celebrity *dare* talk with that accent. Isn't he maddening?" She then turned and gave Charlie a sad, sweet smile.

These girls were several years younger than he was, only kids, and he felt he had stood enough from them. It was his turn now. "If you want to know what I'm doing here," he told them earnestly, "I'll just let you into the secret. There's a prize to be given to the one here who's the cheekiest—the one who's messed up the most bits o' food, and talked about strangers to their faces, and so on—the cheekiest. And I'm going round to see who deserves the prize. And so far, I don't mind telling you—"

"Yes, do tell us."

"It's between you two."

"Darling, we're shattered."

"And I hope you stay shattered for a bit," Charlie muttered to himself as he moved away. He was now within sight of his objective, the far corner. There were not so many people in this part of the room. He would be able to have a quiet smoke in the corner, and possibly sit down to it. In the corner itself, there was a little settee, and the only person on it was a thick-set, gloomy fellow with a large black moustache. He was smoking hard, so Charlie did not hesitate to join him.

"Like this sort of thing?"

Charlie shook his head. "Right out of my line,"

he confessed. "Never been to one o' these things before and don't suppose I'll ever go to one again."

The man looked at him curiously. "You the young chap from the provinces that the *Tribune's* been running so hard? Thought I recognised you. Well, you've done something, and that's more than most of these creatures have. Rum lot, eh?"

Charlie agreed, and told him about his encounter with the two young girls.

"Ought to have their bottoms spanked and be sent home to bed," said the gloomy man. "Boys that talk like girls. Girls that talk like nothing on earth. That's what you get now. No good. No place for a real man. Give me the desert. Know the desert?"

Charlie did not know the desert.

"You can lead a man's life there still." And he stroked his splendid black moustache. "Or the pampas. Know the pampas?"

Charlie did not know the pampas.

"That's a man's country. Give me the pampas"

"They're yours, old chap," said Charlie to himself.

But the gentleman had not finished his requests yet. "Give me a good horse, a gun, some biscuit, salt, and tobacco, and some open rolling country with some good game to pot at and a few water-holes, and I ask for nothing better. That's life. This isn't life. It's nothing. Were you ever up in the tall timber country? That's a man's country, too. Up among the tall timbers."

Charlie did not know what the tall timbers were, but decided not to ask. This fellow seemed to be a famous explorer or something of that sort. Perhaps

he went to wild places to take films and then show them and lecture about them.

But now he had changed the subject. "You're not thinking of setting up an establishment in town, are you? No? I wondered. But my name's Dewson—Major Dewson, and just now I'm in the Interior Decorating and Antique Furniture business. We've done a lot of work for Lady Catterbird here. Here's my card. You might find it useful. Somebody might ask you sometime to recommend a good West End firm of antique dealers and interior decorators. You never know, do you?"

Charlie said that you never did.

"Never up in the Peace River country, were you?" continued the major. "That's a man's life. Do some of these people good to be up there when it's forty below. Yes, I've known it forty below. Well, I must move on. Got another of these damned cocktail parties to go to yet. Rather be out after moose or bush-whacking down under. Ever out there? Another man's country. Well, here goes."

Charlie was sorry to see the major go, even though his conversation tended to be both mysterious and monotonous. He settled himself in his corner and watched the crowd, which was thinning now. They were a queer lot, with hardly a pleasant face amongst them. The older ones, men and women, had a hard, greedy, gobbling look about them. The younger ones seemed peevish, discontented. And then there were the young men who were trying to look like girls and the girls who were trying to look like young men. Charlie could not believe that he was examining a fair specimen of a West End party. Lady

Catterbird must have a lot of queer friends, that was all. Why was he there? What did she want with him?

She began answering this question herself in the next few minutes, for now she bounced up—for though she was a thick, solid woman, she was also a bouncer—and insisted upon introducing him to a lot of people whose names he never caught. But it did not seem to matter to her that he should know them; what was important was that they should know who he was, and she never failed to tell them, though at the same time she always talked as if they must have recognised him at once; all of which rather puzzled Charlie. He did not like being trotted round like a little prize dog, but there was no help for it. He was the more uncomfortable, too, because he could not help feeling that these people were secretly laughing at the pair of them. But Lady Catterbird, if she knew, did not seem to care. By this time she appeared to have had as many drinks as some of her guests, and her large square face was rapidly assuming a moist and flushed look, so that she no longer suggested a whitewashed parrot.

After she had rushed him round the room, she took him on one side and laid a podgy hand, stiff with rings, on his arm in the friendliest fashion. "Now if we're to have that little talk you promised me—you remember? You did promise, didn't you? Well then," she continued very confidentially, "I want you to slip upstairs to my little room, and then the minute I've persuaded these people to go, I'll join you and we'll have the cosiest little talk, and you can tell me what you did and how you like

London and *everything*. I'll tell Irving to show you up, and he can take some food and drinks up there for you. And that'll be *perfect*."

## 3

Irving proved to be a long, sallow-faced butler chap, solemn as an undertaker. He conducted Charlie to the second floor and then showed him into a small room at the far end of the landing. The whole room was done out in deep black and bright red; the lights were invisible and rather dim; there were three small chairs made of metal tubing and an enormous flat couch, piled high with cushions. Charlie did not like the look of the place.

"What can I send up for you, sir?"

"I don't think I want anything, thanks," said Charlie.

"I'd better send you up some small assortment, sir," said Irving, standing at the door and looking gravely at the bewildered Charlie.

"Here, I say," and Charlie leaned forward and addressed the other as man to man, "what's the game?"

"The game, sir?" Irving sounded pained.

"Yes, you know what I mean. The game—here."

"I don't know, sir," replied Irving in his regulation voice. For a second he stared at Charlie and kept his face as wooden as ever; but then he suddenly and surprisingly produced a huge wink; and before Charlie could get a word out, he had gone. Two or three minutes later, one of the waiters

brought in a tray with a lot of bits of food on it and several drinks. Not a word was spoken. Charlie was brooding over that wink. It was nearly half an hour later when Lady Catterbird arrived.

"Don't you love my little den?" she cried as she burst in. "So amusing, isn't it? And so intimate, I think. I keep it just for a few special friends."

Charlie couldn't see how he had become one of those few special friends in such a short time, but he said nothing. That was one thing in this woman's favour: she did all the talking, and if she asked a question, she never seemed to expect an answer.

"Now let's be comfortable," she continued. "Come and sit down here and then we can really talk."

Charlie found himself sitting beside her on the couch arrangement. There was room on it for ten people to sit together in comfort, but, nevertheless, he found she was sitting so close that he could feel the warmth of her thick, hot side. He edged away gently, but it did no good, for she seemed to be able to overflow in his direction without appearing to make any actual movement. And the hand was on his arm again.

"It's so splendid," she was babbling, "to meet someone who's really done something—somebody who's young and clean and strong and brave. You are strong, aren't you? I'm sure you are." And she squeezed his arm and then sighed. "Let me see, you're not married, are you? I think I remember reading that. Well, the girl you're engaged to must be so proud of you. I know I should be."

"I haven't got a girl I'm engaged to," said Charlie.

"Haven't you? How lonely it must be for you then, getting all this praise and glory showered upon you and not having anybody to share it with, just a boy by yourself in this strange city."

Charlie admitted somewhat uneasily that it was a bit lonely. There seemed to be more of her wedged against him now. This, he told himself, was getting a bit too hot in more senses than one. Where was her husband? Hadn't she got one?

"Now you wouldn't think—seeing me among all those people—that I was ever lonely, would you? But I am. I can sympathise with you, even though I do know so many hundreds and hundreds of people, everybody, you might say." She laid a hand on his knee. "Why is it we're all so lonely, whoever we are?" Her voice drooped, and then she drooped, and the temperature rose about twenty degrees. Charlie felt stifled. He was also dreadfully embarrassed. There was no wriggling away now: either he had to submit to the next move, whatever that might be, or he would have to push her clean away and have done with it.

"Here, I say," he cried indignantly, two minutes later, "I've had enough o' this." And with a sudden effort, he freed himself, got up, and breathed again.

Never in his life had he seen anybody change so quickly as this awful woman did now. "What do you mean?" she shouted, and was up in a second, glaring at him, her face turning purple. "How dare you talk to me like that! You insulting young beast!" Her voice rose higher and higher and she made a fearful din, screaming names at him.

The door opened. A shortish, elderly man was standing there. She stopped screaming at once.

"What's the matter?" the man asked, quite coolly.

"Edward," she gasped, "this man's been insulting me. I've never been so insulted. Have him turned out of the house at once."

"Certainly, my dear," replied the man, who was obviously her husband, Sir Edward Catterbird. He looked sternly at Charlie. "Come along."

"Yes, but half a minute," Charlie began.

"Not a word. This way."

"Edward," his wife wailed behind them, "I'll go and rest."

"Quite right, my dear. This way." And Sir Edward guided him briskly along the landing and then down the great staircase. But when they arrived at the bottom, instead of showing him the front door, Sir Edward marched him round to the left until they finally arrived at a small room at the back, a leathery, smoky room filled with books and maps.

"Sit down," said Sir Edward briskly. "Smoke something. Have a drink." He was a rather small man, but there was something naturally commanding about him. He had a wrinkled brown face and a fine hooked nose, over which his eyes looked as tiny and bright as the eyes of some masterful mouse.

"That's all right," Charlie began again, "but before we go any farther, I want you to understand—"

"That you had a rather embarrassing time in there," said his host coolly. "You wouldn't be here if I didn't understand that. This has happened once or twice before, I'm sorry to say. We will now drop

the subject, if you don't mind. Join me in a whisky and soda. Or I can give you a good ale. What about a tankard?"

"Well, I must say some beer would go down all right, thank you." Charlie mopped his forehead. The adventures of the last ten minutes had been a bit too much for him. He was still puffing and blowing as if he had just run a mile. He was glad to rest and say nothing while Sir Edward ordered the drinks.

"What puzzles me," said Sir Edward, after they had got their drinks, "is how you come to be here at all. I'm getting used to meeting the strangest young men in this house, but they all looked very different from you, my friend. Now I flatter myself I'm rather good at placing people. I've had to be. If I were asked what you were, I should say that you were an artisan from—well—let's say, the North Midlands. Am I right? No, there's nothing of the Sherlock Holmes touch about it. I've had experience of so many different types, that's all. Well, it's a change—and not an unpleasant one—to come across a young fellow like you here. But I still don't see how you came to be here."

Charlie explained himself briefly, hastily.

"Ah yes, that accounts for it. One of my wife's celebrity series. And how do you like being a celebrity, a national figure?"

"I don't make much of it so far," replied Charlie cautiously. "It didn't start till Tuesday night. Up to now it seems a bit silly, a lot of fuss and palaver about nothing. Mind you, it's the paper that's done it, right from the start—and not me."

"Quite so. It's the papers that manufacture these reputations nowadays. That's why they're never very real. They ring hollow. You can tell them in a minute from the genuine reputations, the ones that men get in their professions or among their fellow-workers, or those strong local reputations that are based on intimate knowledge. We people who get blown up by newspaper praise are only like balloons with faces painted on 'em." He filled and lit a small black pipe, and soon his eyes were twinkling through the smoke.

"That is so," said Charlie slowly, thoughtfully. "Though I'm not so sure about them local reputations. I've noticed for some time that anybody who's boosted a bit in the papers is looked up to a lot more in his own place. I'll bet anything that if I went to Bendworth—that's where I come from—or back to Utterton—where I've been working—that they'd be making more fuss in two minutes than they've ever done before in two years."

Sir Edward nodded. "True enough, but I meant something different from making a fuss when I talked about local reputations. I don't want to bore you with all this, but I feel like talking—d'you mind? I don't often talk nowadays. But I feel that circumstances"—and here he gave a wry grin—"have made us almost intimately acquainted. And I can talk to a man who's used his hands, who's really worked. I can't talk to these shrinking men milliners I usually have to escort in or out of this house."

"There were some o' them at the party. They were a rum lot at that party."

"Yes, most of them are simply flies round a honey-

pot. I provide the honey. This part of the world swarms with parasites. I suppose it must; always did, always will. I help to keep a lot of them. Not that I care about them, but my wife does, and she has a right to the spoils. You see, I happen to be very fond of her. What I see there isn't what you see. We weren't always Sir Edward and Lady Catterbird, living like this. I am, by profession, a civil engineer, and a very good civil engineer. I've still got, in some quarters, that solid professional reputation I was talking about just now. And that's not a fact I forget. But it also happens that I'm very clever about money. Perhaps you are too, you never know."

"Well, I can make a pound or two go as far as the next chap, if that's what you mean."

"It isn't, though I'm not sure that doesn't come in."

"Well, that's all the dealings with money I have."

"Don't think yourself unlucky if it's all you ever do have. When I say I'm clever with money, I mean I'm good at juggling with it. I'm what some damn fools call a born financier. I don't understand finance really—very few people do, in fact I doubt if anybody does—but I can do tricks with it. I found that out by accident, and very soon, almost before I knew where I was, I wasn't a civil engineer any longer—though I still employed civil engineers, and do yet—but I was a money-spinner. Have you ever noticed who it is who really makes money?"

"No, I haven't," said Charlie boldly. "Where I've spent my time, you only notice them that doesn't make money. And there's a lot of 'em to notice, too."

"You've got to be a juggler, a clever or lucky gambler, to make a lot of money. You can't make a big fortune by handling things or ideas, you can only do it by manipulating money, by usury and gambling."

"And very nice too."

"That's just what it isn't."

"Oh no! Well, I can tell you this," said Charlie, who had suddenly lost his awe of this little man, "if you expect me to be sorry for you—just because you've got into the way of making a lot o' money—then you'll be disappointed. If you don't like having it, you can give it away. I know plenty who'll be glad of a bit."

"Let me say what I began to say, my friend. There's a curse on usury and gambling, on all money-spinning. Ever noticed that?"

"Can't say that I have."

"There is. Working with real things keeps you sane. I was sane when I was a civil engineer. Now I'm not so sure. I'm not certain of sanity anywhere in this house. My wife was once a woman of grand courage and sense—probably is yet, somewhere underneath—but this atmosphere of money-juggling has been too much for her. Once you begin to work with money and nothing but money, the real things seem to wither away." The little eyes glittered. "You're only one degree removed from those poor devils in asylums who think they're Julius Cæsar or Napoleon and spend all day issuing orders to imaginary armies. The only difference is, more people enter into the conspiracy to delude you when you enjoy your lunacy in the City. It won't last

much longer, of course, and if people had had any sense, it wouldn't have lasted so long, and I'd have been building dams and aqueducts and living a sensible life."

"Well, you can get out of it, can't you?" said Charlie.

"Yes, of course I can. There are three exits. The bankruptcy court, gaol, and death. No, I'm wrong—there's a fourth—the mad-house."

"Here, steady on," for Charlie was really alarmed by the strange little man's wild words and his glittering eyes. Perhaps he was mad. Perhaps they were all mad in this house.

"I'm not asking for your sympathy, young man. I'm telling you this to explain why you've had such a queer time here. It isn't us—we're all right, really. But something—call it what you like—outraged Nature, a division in ourselves, a curse—is defeating us. We're half mad already. We're trying to escape. You saw one way—upstairs. I've got my own ways, too—perhaps suddenly talking like this is one of them." He stopped, then looked hard at Charlie. "I hope you're going back to your job pretty soon."

"I don't think I've got a job to go back to," said Charlie. "Manager didn't like all this business, and I fancy he won't be for taking me back again. Besides, they'll have had to take somebody on to do my job while I'm away. But I expect I'll have to be doing something soon. I'm not bad with my hands. I was trained as a fitter, but I've done all sorts since then. Perhaps you could get me a job with one o' your concerns, could you?"

"Certainly I could. There'd be no difficulty about

that. That is, as long as you've no objection to seeing another man—perhaps an older man with a wife and family—turned out to make room for you." And he looked at Charlie and raised his eyebrows in an odd, meaning fashion.

"Oh no, that 'ud never do," cried Charlie decisively. "I can see that. I didn't think when I spoke. Forget it."

"No, I won't forget it. Come and see me when you're tired of being one of the *Daily Tribune's* side-shows. I might find something for you. Have you met Sir Gregory Hatchland yet—he owns your paper?"

"Met him yesterday. Didn't fancy him much."

"He's more than half crazy," Sir Edward remarked easily. "Another of us. There you are, you see. By the way, if you do decide to call on me, take care Lady Catterbird doesn't see you. Better try and get hold of me at my office. I won't show you to the door, for various reasons. You can find your own way out, can't you? Good luck to you."

Charlie hurried out, to find one of the tall young men in uniform waiting in the hall with his hat. He snatched up the hat, with a muttered word of thanks, and did not draw another breath until he was outside in the dusky square. There he drew a very long and luxurious breath and stopped to enjoy it.

He saw Ida Chatwick in the hotel on Saturday morning. There was no time for them to speak. She

was with a very dressy dark young man, and she looked radiant. Charlie had an instant depressing vision of her soaring far far beyond any reach of his. He told himself that he might as well stop thinking about her at once, but unfortunately he couldn't stop thinking about her. Some day, perhaps very soon, he would have the satisfaction of saying that he had been acquainted with her once, and then, of course, nobody would believe him. But meanwhile it was rather a heart-aching business just thinking about her. Up to now Charlie had spent a fair amount of time with girls, especially Daisy Halstead, but he had never spent much time thinking about them. He had never felt about Daisy Halstead what he felt about this girl. But then you couldn't compare them. This Ida Chatwick just knocked you flat. It wasn't only her looks, so he pointed out to himself, it was—well, there was something about the girl that got you. Probably by this time, he reflected, it was getting dozens of fellows, all of them likely to interest such a girl more than he could ever hope to do. He decided, however, to have one more talk with her before she floated into the upper air of film stars and fashionable beauties and the like. He did not know when or where he would have that last talk, but he would manage it somehow.

Actually he did not manage it. Like many other affairs, like the whole of this adventure, it was managed for him. Here indeed was the hand of Fate, which was to Charlie at all times no mere metaphor, but a working entity. That hand had set down in the B.B.C. National programme, as a special Saturday night tit-bit, a "Surprise Item" at 9.20.

Charlie and Mr. Kinney were part of that item. At a little after nine the two of them were being moved vertically up Broadcasting House to the particular floor where a microphone awaited them. It was all painfully exciting. Merely to think where you were and what you were about to do was to find yourself at once with a dry mouth and thumping heart. Even Mr. Kinney seemed a bit nervous. They were taken along a corridor that reminded Charlie of the strange houses you see in films and nowhere else. It wasn't quite human. There was a band playing somewhere, and it was the sound of that band more than anything else that made Charlie realise, with a new gust of terror, that he was *part of the wireless programme*, and that millions of ears would soon be waiting for some dry, cracked noise to come out of the desert of his mouth. They were shown into a room that belonged to the same film family as the corridor outside; a very bright, up-to-the-minute sort of room that seemed to be waiting for a new race of beings to find comfort and pleasure in it; a room that also had a sinister arrangement of light-signals over the door, an unfriendly electric clock, and what was obviously a microphone on the table; in short, it was a broadcasting studio.

They were left alone for a minute or two. "Well," said Mr. Kinney, in a small, cracked voice quite unlike his usual boom, "here we are. Done this very well, haven't they?" He fussed about with some sheets of typescript.

"May suit them all right," muttered Charlie, "but it frightens the life out o' me."

"That's your bit to read." He handed over one of

the sheets. "Just the usual stuff. Glad to have done your duty, and so forth. Better glance through it."

"I should think I had," said Charlie pitifully. He heard a noise outside. There was a tiny hole in the door, and now there seemed to be an eye looking through this hole. The next moment Miss Ida Chatwick, late of Pondersley, was in the studio. With her were a very polite young man in evening dress and Mr. Gregory of the *Morning Pictorial*. Charlie stared at the girl, who immediately gave him a smile that was friendliness itself.

"Are you on this turn, too?" he asked.

"Yes, isn't it awful? I know I shall nearly die. Don't you feel nervous?"

"Me? I should think I do."

"You don't look it. Honestly you don't."

"You don't either," said Charlie stoutly. "You look as if you've been doing it all your life."

"I don't feel like that. I'm trembling. Look." And she held out her hands.

Charlie, suddenly brave because they were both in such a desperate pass, gave one of the hands a good friendly squeeze, and the hand seemed glad to receive it. In fact, its owner admitted as much.

"I feel a bit better now you're here," she whispered, to his great delight. "What have you to do? Read something?"

"That's all," he said boldly. "It's nothing. I had to do it before for the movie-tone news. Have they given you your little piece?"

They had, and now she began looking at the few lines of typescript as if they had been written in some unknown language.

"Now you've got the order," said the young man in evening clothes. "I shall announce what we're doing. Then Mr. Gregory follows on, and he calls Miss Chatwick. Then I announce Mr. Kinney, and he talks, and then calls Mr. Habble. All right?"

A red light, like a dreadful eye, began winking above the door. The young man, with a "Quiet now," pressed a button on the desk. The red eye maintained a fixed glare at them now. "We're all here," it said, "millions of us, so not a cough nor a whisper nor the slightest mistake."

"This is the National Programme from London," the young man told the microphone in an easy, friendly fashion.

Charlie and the girl looked at one another. Charlie managed some sort of grin, and the girl, after visibly gulping, produced the sickly ghost of a reply. Addressing the listening millions as if they were all his favourite little nieces and he was their patronising but kind old uncle, the announcer explained the nature of the delicious little frolic in store for them. Then Mr. Gregory, whom nervousness had turned into a very grim and rasping fellow, talked for a minute about the beauty competition and read a joke or two about it in a tone of voice appropriate to a public executioner, and then called Miss Chatwick to the microphone as if he were calling her to the guillotine. When he saw the girl go up, holding her bit of paper in a very shaky hand, Charlie lost all his own nervousness in a sudden flood of anxiety and tenderness for her. Never before had any girl made him feel like that. She struggled through her few sentences all right, and

when she had done, she smiled at Charlie as if to thank him for feeling like that about her. Mr. Kinney had decided to bluff it out, and so he roared at the microphone, and must have made loud-speakers rattle throughout thirty counties. "And here's Charles Habble himself," he concluded, "ready to say a few words to you. And he'd rather face a dozen fires, he says, than one microphone."

Suppose, Charlie thought wildly, he rushed up to that microphone and began: "Listen, you damn fools, I'm going to tell you the truth—" What then? Oh—what then? But now he was in front of it, looking at his sheet of typescript from the *Tribune* office. Had he a voice? No, no voice, all gone. Well, he must make some sort of noise. "I only wish to say," he began, and read on slowly, carefully, and without much expression, to the end. And that was that. The announcer touched the button again; the red eye disappeared; the million ears left the room. All over.

A wonderful feeling of release came to them all, making them chatter happily. Charlie and the girl found themselves together, talking it over, at once. "And it's not so bad once you get started, is it?" she cried, alight now. "Waiting's the worst. That's why I was so sorry for you. Do you think they'd hear me properly."

There were reassurances, compliments, on both sides.

"And how are you getting on?" asked Charlie finally.

"Oh—I'm having a wonderful time. Aren't you? I had one little film test this morning—nothing

much—but I'm having a better one on Monday. I got so excited in the studio, and everybody was very nice. And now I'm going to see a new film they've just made—yes, to-night, now. And I've had a lot of letters, and I've some more new things—some I've had given me and some I've bought—and it's all so lovely that if it goes on much longer I feel I'll burst. You know. Don't you feel like that, too? And aren't you frightened all the time that something'll happen to spoil it all? I'm not so bad as I was, but I still feel that. Don't you? Isn't it funny meeting here like this? We do meet in some funny places, don't we?"

"We do. But I don't think we'll be meeting in 'em much longer," he told her.

"Oh, why not? You're not going away, are you?"

She sounded quite disappointed. Of course she couldn't be, having all this excitement and hardly knowing him, but it was nice of her to pretend a bit. "No, I'm not going away, not that I know of. I don't know what I'm going to do. But—well—I don't know—but"—he concluded lamely—"I don't suppose we'll be meeting again like this."

"Well, I hope so."

"Do you really?"

"Yes, of course I do. Don't you?"

"Yes, I do."

"It's so nice, isn't it, coming across somebody who's almost from your own place, you know, not a Londoner. I felt a lot better when I saw you here to-night. Mind you, I'm glad to be on my own—it's what I've always looked forward to."

"Yes, I expect it is," he said, rather gloomily.

"I don't want a lot of Pondersley people nosing round. But you're different, after all. Did you see that Lady What's-her-name again?"

"Yes. Yesterday. I had to go to her party."

"She wouldn't ask me. No fear. I thought she was awful."

"She was."

"Do you still see that red-haired chambermaid at the hotel—the one who's going to marry a policeman?"

"Yes. She tells me a bit more about him every time I see her."

"I liked her. She told me about you."

"What about me?"

"Oh—nothing much. Y'know, just mentioned you." The girl looked round. "Oh—I'll have to run. Where did I put my bag?"

"It's here."

"Oh—thanks ever so much." She looked hard at him, smiled, and then deliberately in the best Pondersley style said: "Be good."

"Be good—Ida."

"Be good—Chhaar-lie." And she laughed quickly and then hurried out.

"Not a bad girl that," said Mr. Kinney, a minute later, "not when you consider that she's won a beauty prize offered by the *Morning Pictorial*. Not a bad girl at all. Not until some poor devil goes and marries her."

"Now what d'you mean by that?" Charlie demanded aggressively.

On the next night, Sunday, the Queen's Hall was well filled with those mysterious fellow-citizens of ours who like attending meetings. They had not had long notice for this one, but a column in yesterday's *Daily Tribune* and Kinney's article in to-day's *Sunday Courier* had brought them in. Sir Gregory Hatchland was a poor public speaker, and so was not performing himself for the benefit of his scheme for a League of Imperial Yeomen; but he had seen to it that there should be some good speakers on the platform. His chairman was old Lord Kirfadden, who seemed to have passed most of his life in the chair at meetings of one kind and another; a born chairman; for he had an imposing presence—as if a pink and white horse had been persuaded into a black coat and a very high collar and had been taught to say a few words—and some vague but rosy convictions and just enough sense to know when to use his little wooden hammer. The principal speaker was that imperial tower of strength, that colossal sahib, Lord Blankiron, one of the few strong men remaining in our degenerate race. His lordship had always had a contempt for all foreigners, and especially for Asiatics, whom he regarded as little better than monkeys; and so it seemed odd that he should have chosen to spend the greater part of his adult life working among these sub-human creatures and should be fond of introducing their monkey words into his talk. Actually he was an Asiatic character; he loved the gorgeous

trappings of power, and, like any mountain tribesman, he delighted in violence. He was completely at home in a world where people were being shot; he himself had been shot at several times and was quite pleased about it; all he asked was to do a lot of shooting back, to put 'em up against walls by the dozen. A League of Imperial Yeomen suggested something new in uniforms and parades and a good excuse for using more ammunition in all parts of the world, and so he had welcomed the scheme with enthusiasm. The other speakers were two Conservative Members of Parliament, one of them a retired jerry-builder from the North who liked to pretend he was a rough diamond, a simple toiler, when actually he was a cunning old rascal out for a title and anything else he could get; and the other was a young sportsman with a lisp, whose aunt had recently left him forty-five thousand pounds; and an admiral and a general, both of whom were inspired by a spirit of patriotism and also by a growing conviction that if they and other people were not very careful, they would soon be of no importance whatever in the world. A further attraction had been promised—namely, the appearance on the platform of that heroic young workman from the Midlands, Charles Habble, who, like the good reader of the *Daily Tribune* that he was, would say a few words in support of the League of Imperial Yeomen.

The organ, which had been thundering out some good old English songs, gave a final roar, and Lord Kirfadden and his five speakers appeared on the platform, which in its mixture of Union Jacks and palms was itself symbolic of the Empire. The man

Habble was not there on the platform because people were anxious to see him rather than hear him, and so it had been wisely decided to let him make a dramatic appearance on the platform towards the end of the meeting. Actually at this moment he was sitting in an ante-room just beyond those curtains at the side, like some violinist waiting to play his concerto.

Lord Kirfadden opened the meeting as he had opened so many, many meetings, with the usual little joke about his own inefficiency, the usual vague reference to the importance of the occasion, the usual appeals for a considerate hearing. The retired jerry-builder followed, and said that 'e 'oped they would bear with 'im if 'e talked for a bit about 'is old trade of building, which he then compared, more aptly than he knew, with the creation of our great Empire. The young member with the lisp came next, to the obvious delight of some members of the audience in the gallery. He began a tremendously long and involved sentence, in which he intended to point out that his lack of importance as a speaker was more than counterbalanced by the fact that he had just returned from a tour of the Empire, and so could talk of it from first-hand knowledge, but what with his lisp, geography, and the difficulty of piling up relative clauses, he nearly sank off the coast of New Zealand. He was rescued by Mr. Kipling. "What—er—should they know of England," he demanded, "who—er—only England know?" A voice from somewhere near the roof promptly replied "Everything," but ignoring this, he tried Mr. Kipling again, and this time was unfortunate enough to find himself left

with "Eatht ith Eatht and Wetht ith Wetht," at which a yell went up from the back, to his great discomfiture. But all the speakers so far had been mere makeweights. It was now Lord Blankiron's turn, and the meeting came to life at once. Here was a strong man who had been shot at all over the place. The audience gave him an enthusiastic reception, but his square brown face, with its familiar firing-squad look, seemed grimmer than ever, as if he were considering ways and means of machine-gunning the two back rows of the gallery. Lord Blankiron was an effective speaker, and was considered in many quarters a real orator, chiefly because, like some other of our admired orators, he talked in bad eighteenth-century prose, loaded with stale imagery and those mild jokes that when clothed in polysyllables are accepted in political circles as pieces of scathing wit. Like all his kind, he was excessively slow and long-winded, going into action like an old three-decker; but such was his reputation and so imposing was his presence that on this occasion he completely held the audience at once, and it looked as if he would hold them for the next three-quarters of an hour.

One of the very few persons in the building who were not hanging upon Lord Blankiron's measured utterances was Charlie Habble. He was sitting in the ante-room by himself, smoking and ruminating in a rather gloomy fashion. He did not care tuppence about the meeting. As he had told Sir Gregory Hatchland to his face, he was not an enthusiastic admirer of the Empire, and this projected League of Imperial Yeomen meant nothing to him. He had

not the slightest desire to be an Imperial Yeoman himself or to persuade anybody else to become one. All he had to do to-night was to walk on to the platform and recite three or four sentences from which the audience would gather that heroic young workmen were prepared to welcome the League. He was getting rather tired of reciting these little pieces that the *Tribune* prepared for him. But that was not really why he was not feeling very cheerful. There was more than that in it.

Somebody came in. He looked up in that slow way people do when they are dispirited and expect nothing good to happen. It was his friend Hughson.

"Just looked in from the office," Hughson explained. "How's the meeting?"

"I don't know—"

"And you don't care. I can see that. Well, well, well. What's the matter? You look as if you've just been visited by the ghost of a disappointed contralto. Sunday night perhaps. I often feel like that on Sunday night. I'm going into Soho—where the nasty foreigners live, you know, and serve guinea-pig as chicken—on a story. Like to come when you've said your piece?"

"Wouldn't mind," Charlie growled. He caught Hughson's impudent friendly eye, and found a feeble grin. "I dunno. Feel right out o' sorts to-night. Nothing wrong with me, y'know."

"Just stale and flat. It's the way you celebrities live. You ought to be one of the workers, like me. Oh—I've brought some letters of yours on from the office." He pulled a packet of them out of his pocket.

"You can keep 'em."

"Oh—no, I can't. Better have a look at them." He began turning them over himself. "Start with these."

"Here," cried Charlie a minute later, in a new and urgent tone, "this is from my Uncle Tom."

"Not the one with the cabin?" And then Hughson saw that Charlie was looking disturbed. "What's the matter?"

"It's from my Uncle Tom. He lives up north—Slakeby. He married my mother's sister. And he says she's bad and 'ud like to see me. She always thought a lot about me, my Aunt Nellie did. I did of her, too. And she's poorly. They're all in a bad way up there, y'know. I ought t'have thought about them before. By God—she shall see me, an' sharp, too. I'm off."

"Not to-night?"

"Yes, to-night. There'll be trains going up that way to-night, won't there? Course there will. I'm going to get my bag and then I'm off."

"Do you mean to say, Habble," said Hughson gravely, "that you're going to leave without making an appearance at Sir Gregory Hatchland's meeting?"

"Yes, I do. To hell with the meeting."

"Splendid!" cried Hughson.

"I don't want to get you into trouble, lad," said Charlie, who suddenly felt that this was the only friend he had in London.

"If you want to go, they can't blame me for not stopping you. Besides, look what a good story it makes."

"Oh—my God!—is this another story? I'm sick o'

your stories. Well, I'm off, and they can whistle for me here."

"I'll come with you to the hotel. I might be able to save you some time. What about money?"

"That's all right. Got some. I banked that cheque the other day, and then drew some out."

On the way to the hotel, Charlie said: "You'd better make the most of this 'story,' as you call it, because, y'know, it might be the last you'll get out of me."

"It might. And then again," said Hughson dreamily, "it might be the last we'll want. The Press is like a woman, and mustn't be taken for granted. How long are you going to be away?"

"That I can't tell you. It depends."

"Well, don't be surprised if we're all different when you come back. For instance, I may be a very tall bony fellow with a ginger moustache and a Scots accent. But never mind, come and see me. Perhaps they'll send me up to see you at wherever it is—perhaps. Not much chance, though, we don't like putting the spotlight on that part of the country. Your uncle could hardly have lived in a worse place. He's taking you right out of the news."

"Well, that's where most people are, isn't it?"

"It is. And—on the whole—my dear chap, the best people."

Charlie caught the 10.45 from King's Cross. Some-time during the small hours he would have to change at York, and he would be in the neighbour-hood of Slakeby long before most people there had thought of getting up; but he did not care. He was very fond of this aunt and now was worried about

her, yet as the train gathered speed and went shrieking into the northern darkness, he found himself free from the heaviness that had oppressed him earlier in the evening. He could breathe again. He was anxious, tired, but singularly lightened at heart.

## CHAPTER SIX

### THIS OTHER EDEN

#### 1

It was cold and quiet in Slakeby. The sun was struggling up, promising a fine day, but it was still so early in the morning when Charlie walked out of the station that there was a winter chill on everything. Shivering slightly as he went, he stepped out briskly. It was too early to go to his uncle's—they would probably be in bed for another hour yet—so he walked in search of a place where he could get a drink of tea and something to eat. It was seven years since he had been in Slakeby, but he knew his way about because he had stayed there a good many times when he was a boy and when his uncle, an engineer at the biggest of the local works, had been earning very good money. It took him some time, however, to find a little eating-place that was open. The town was so quiet that the noise of an occasional lorry or cart, streets away, seemed shattering. When somebody banged a couple of milk-cans together, at the other end of the road, he felt like running to tell the chap not to make such a row. At last he found a place that was open, and there he ordered a big cup of tea and a sandwich. The only other person inside was the proprietor himself, a dirty, fattish, sad chap, who wore nothing but a

greasy old waistcoat over his crumpled shirt. Having served Charlie, he lit a cigarette, put his elbows on the counter, and stared out hopelessly into the street.

After a gulp or two of the hot tea, Charlie felt better and in need of a little conversation. "Quiet," he began. "But it's early, isn't it?"

"Ay, it's early," said the proprietor, who then blew out a lot of cigarette smoke and contrived at the same time to make a contemptuous hissing noise.

But Charlie was not discouraged. "Still, time's getting on. Town seems a bit dead."

"Seems a bit dead?" The proprietor woke up. "It doesn't seem so, it bloody well *is* so. All it wants is to stiffen and then have a good funeral."

"Bad as that, is it?"

"Yes, it is," he shouted, as if Charlie had been trying to contradict him. "I know what I'm talking about. I wish I didn't. But I do. D'you know why I'm here—still here—trying to run this business?"

Charlie didn't.

"Because I've no bloody sense. Never had, never will have."

Charlie could not reply to this, and so he said nothing, but attended to his tea and sandwich.

"If I'd had any sense," the proprietor continued, still staring out into the street, "I'd have got out o' this while I'd the chance. But I was a fool to meself—that's what I was—a fool to meself." And shaking his head, slowly and softly he called himself several queer things. Having delivered final judgment, he looked at Charlie and said: "D'you want

anything else? Well, if you don't, that'll be five-pence."

There might not be anything in this encounter to cheer a man, but the hot drink and the sandwich had made a difference and Charlie felt much better when he walked down the street again. It was warmer, too, and there were more signs of life about. It was still too early to go to his uncle's house, however, so he lit a cigarette and wandered round until at last he reached the main bridge over the river. There he leaned against the parapet and looked about him. The river was still as dirty as ever, but now there seemed no particular reason why it should be dirty. Only one ship—and that a tiny coasting vessel—to be seen there; one miserable little ship where there used to be dozens. Where were the shipyards and slips he remembered all along the banks? The sheds were there and a crane or two, and that was all. Everything else—finished, gone. He looked at the tall chimneys on every side. Most of them might have been so many monuments, for not a wisp of smoke was coming out of them. Some of the towns in the Midlands had been knocked sideways by the depression, but this place had been knocked flat. There was an unfamiliar glimmer of green in the empty spaces between those rows of sheds and the black mud of the river. He stared hard. That was grass. The grass was growing where they used to build ships. This wasn't an industrial town any longer: it was a graveyard, with the grass growing over it and with its cold mill chimneys as monuments.

Charlie had heard talk of a big slump when he

had been here before, seven years ago, but he was younger and sillier then and hadn't bothered about it. Since then he had heard from his Aunt Nellie that they were all doing badly, had been sorry for them, but had not thought much about it. Even if he had come up here a week before, he would not have felt what he felt now, probably would not have noticed so much. But fantastic events had shaken him out of his routine of work and play. He had come here not from Bendworth or Utterton, but from London, and the West End of London, which even now was beginning to look in retrospect like a place in a mad film, in which he, Charlie Habble, had been compelled by some freak of fate to play a lunatic part. Now it was as if he had never seen Slakeby before, as if, too, a new Charlie Habble were here, one who noticed far more than the old one would ever have done. And all the time he was in Slakeby, he remained the staring, puzzled, rather heart-sick young man on the bridge in the early morning, newly arrived by the London train, who found he could no more take all this for granted than he could accept without question his life in the New Cecil Hotel.

When he left the bridge, sauntering anywhere simply to kill time, he began to think about these relations of his, and not without shame, for they had been very good to him when he was a boy and he had thought little about them lately, had not thought about them at all these last few days. His Aunt Nellie, one of those dark, wiry, tireless little women, had always been the merriest of all his relations. She liked nothing better than to see a lot of

young folks enjoying themselves. She had always had a knack of getting a party going in lively style. Of course there had been plenty of money about in those days. He remembered old outings and bean-feasts, and caught a glimpse of his aunt's little face flashing through them all, the darkest and the brightest there. This had seemed a big roaring city then, with everything in it you could want. There didn't seem any connection between that place and this decayed town. Charlie thought about his uncle, Tom Adderson, and thought about him with some affection and a great deal of respect. Tom Adderson was quite different from his wife, very quiet, rather stern, and in some queer way, which Charlie did not attempt to define, a bit religious. He was no chapel-goer, Tom Adderson wasn't, yet you always felt he was a bit religious in his own grim way. As a boy Charlie had been in awe of this tall bony engineer, and he wasn't prepared to say even now that he wasn't a little bit frightened of him. Then there were their children, his two cousins, Johnny and Madge. Why, Johnny, who was only a few years younger than he was, would be twenty-two or three now; and little Madge must be about twenty. He had a clear picture of them both in his mind—Johnny, dark like his mother, tall and bony like his father, and Madge with her curly brown hair and fine blue eyes, a proper little madam—but only as they had been seven to ten years ago. There was a Christmas once he had spent with them here. . . .

Now they lived at 18 Fishnet Street. He had not been there before, but after enquiring he found it was in a fairly familiar part of the town, not very

far from the river. It all had a broken-down look. You knew at once that there was no good money coming in here. About nine o'clock. They would be up now. He could risk it.

An elderly man answered his knock at Number 18, a very shabby, stooping man wearing steel spectacles. He was a grey figure, for his hair was grey, there was a thick grey stubble on his chin, and his hollow cheeks had a queer greyish look.

"What d'you want?"

"It's me, Uncle. Charlie—Charlie Habble."

"So it is. Nay, lad, I didn't recognise you. Come inside."

This was a lot worse than standing on that bridge. What had they been doing to Tom Adderson that he could look like that? If this was his uncle, what would his Aunt Nellie look like?

2

Johnny was inside, a very different Johnny from the lad he had known seven years ago. He was a strapping fellow now, but for all that he didn't look right. He was too thin; he slouched; he was very shabby; and his eyes and mouth were bitter. He was surprised to see Charlie.

"I thought you were a great man in London, Charlie," he said. "Hero—and all that. What's made you come up here?"

"Because I asked him to, lad, that's why," said his father. "Your mother'd like to see him."

"Well, I don't blame her," Johnny replied, with

a sharp glance at Charlie. "He'll be a nice change from some of us. All right, Charlie lad, no offence. But we're not used to seeing people all dressed up to kill—like you."

"Where is she—my Aunt Nellie?" asked Charlie, wisely deciding to ignore Johnny's remarks.

"She's upstairs in bed," his uncle replied, lowering his voice. "No, she's no worse. We've a job to keep her i' bed, but doctor's told her to lay up a bit, and I've told her, and for once she's doing what she's told. Now listen, lad—before we go any further. She's heard a lot o' talk about you, and she's been fretting to see you, but she doesn't know I wrote, and you mustn't go and tell her else she'll play war wi' me. Let on you thought of it yourself. That'll please her and get me into no trouble."

"Yes, I see. How is she?"

"Well, she's poorly. I'm not going to say she isn't."

"What is it that's wrong?"

"Well, lad"—and his uncle hesitated—"doctor says it's one or two things—"

"I can tell you what it is—and sharp," Johnny broke in harshly. "It's bloody starvation, that's what it is. Doing without to let us have it—that's what it is. And worry."

"All right, lad," said his father. "Keep it down, keep it down. You're not shouting at the club now. And there's been some a lot worse than we've been."

"Well, what if there has?" Johnny retorted.

"Where's Madge?" Charlie asked.

"She's working."

"The only one that is working," said Johnny.

"Got a job in a shop. She gets eighteen bob a week. It isn't much, but it's a damned sight more than I can earn. And even then we don't get it."

"How d'you mean?"

"Why, they deduct eleven and six from our transition pay because she's bringing in eighteen bob. We're no better off."

His father stood up. "Yes, we are. We've got somebody working. That's something. I'll go and see if your aunt's awake, Charlie."

Johnny was quiet for a moment. Then, looking more friendly, he said: "Well, I'm glad you're here, Charlie. It'll brighten my mother up a bit. She's been reading about you, and she'll want to know all about what it feels like to be called a hero up in London. Are you staying a bit?"

Charlie said that he was and explained that he had left his bags at the station. He added a remark about getting lodgings just near.

"Oh, that'll be easy enough," said Johnny. "I know one or two places myself and I expect my mother knows a lot more. Here, I'll go and get your bags. Oh—that's all right. It'll give me something to do."

"Got any fags, Johnny?"

Johnny grinned ruefully. "About two ends."

"Get some, will you?" said Charlie, as if he were asking the other to do him a favour. And he handed over a shilling.

To Charlie's relief, his cousin simply nodded, then put on his coat and scarf, which had been hanging over the back of a chair, found his cap, and departed. Charlie looked round the room, which

was full of things, most of which he remembered. He was pleasantly surprised to find that their home was anything but bare, though everything was very shabby and worn. Obviously, nothing new had been bought for years. On the other hand, they hadn't been reduced to wholesale pawning. That was something.

"I was just thinking, Uncle," he said, a minute later, "I remember most of these things. You've kept the home together all right, haven't you?" He sounded brisk, cheerful.

His uncle shook his head. "Nay, lad, most o' these things would have gone long since if we could ha' found anybody to buy 'em. You can't pawn anything but bedclothes in Slakeby these days. Pawnshops were full up long since. We all want to sell, and there's nobody to buy."

Charlie's face fell. "I didn't think o' that."

"There's a lot o' things you don't think of, lad, till the time comes. You live an' learn. At least you learn, I'm none so sure about living. Well, will you go up and have a word with your aunt? And don't forget what I said."

As he went up the dark little stairs he heard Aunt Nellie's voice, a thin excited cry, calling him, and he suddenly felt all weak and queer, as if the heart inside him had turned to water. The first things he saw in that room were her eyes, the same merry dark eyes, but bigger than ever now.

"Why Charlie—Charlie!"

"Aunt Nellie!"

She rose up from her pillow, took hold of him, laughed and cried. He himself had not been so near

to crying for years. There was plenty to cry about here. She looked so much older, so yellow and shrunken, so very thin. Every gay memory of her, all the fun they had had, returned to him in a lightning flash and then shrivelled to this miserable moment. "By God!" he was saying inside, "it's wicked, it's wicked."

"Now don't look at me like that, Charlie," she cried gaily, "I know I'm all skin and bone, but your poor old auntie never was much more, y'know, just like a fourpenny rabbit. Oh—but I'm so glad to see you, Charlie. You're looking so well, too. D'you know, you've more of a look of your mother than ever you had. And wouldn't she have been proud of you? She would that! And I'm proud of you, Charlie—we all are—with pieces about you in the papers and your photograph and everything! And look at your clothes, too. I'll bet our Johnny was jealous, wasn't he? Poor lad, it's just how he'd like to look—and he *could* look too if he had a chance. Isn't it a shame? Boys now haven't a chance of anything, not up here they haven't. Well now, Charlie, you've got to tell me all about it. But what made you leave all them grand folks to come and see us?"

He told her it was because he had wanted to see them all again and that this had been his first chance for a long time. Then he had to tell her all that had happened to him in London, and the pleasure she took in this recital, her face brightening with every new triumph of his, was wonderful to see. Nor could he cut it short, for she would have everything told, what he ate and drank there, the very feel of the bedclothes in the grand fairy-tale hotel.

"Now that's enough about me," he said finally.  
"It's all a lot o' palaver about nothing. I want to  
hear about you."

Her face lost some of its brightness. "Well, we're carrying on, y'know, Charlie. We're not dead yet, eh? Doctor keeps coming and having a look at me. Nay, I can't help laughing. He comes in and tells me I've got to keep quiet, and then in a few minutes he's shouting his head off, like a big bull."

"What about?"

"Nay, you needn't look like that, lad. He's one of the best friends we have, doctor is. We've known him for twenty-five years. He shouts because he gets so mad about things. He can't get me into the convalescent home because they've a waiting list as long as your arm. Not that I want to go, with two big soft men and a flighty lass to look after. But doctor says I ought to go, and he can't get me in and we can't afford to pay, so that's that. You should hear him go on about everything. Proper Red he is—like our Johnny. Red in the head and red in his ideas—that's our doctor. But he's a right good sort. He looks in to see me, and he knows we can't pay him and we're off the panel now."

"Off the panel! How's that?"

"Because your uncle's been out o' work more than three years. After that, you get no more panel or anything. They give you up as a bad job after that."

"And my uncle's been out over three years?"

"Three years! He's only had five months' work in six years. Think o' that, Charlie. Your Uncle Tom—Tom Adderson—who was one o' the best engineers

Sturks ever had—and everybody knew Sturks' engines all over the world—to come to this! You remember him as he was, don't you, Charlie?"

"Yes," Charlie confessed, "he's changed a bit."

"He's changed a lot, lad. He's twenty years older than he was when you came here last time. It's breaking him, properly breaking him. It's not going short—though that's bad enough—but it's being idle and feeling useless that's done it. I know we oughtn't to grumble, for we've pulled through so far and some I know has been a lot worse off—but he's said sometimes, when it's got him properly down, 'Nay, Nellie, I might as well be dead. My day's done.' And I tell him not to talk so soft. Life's sweet, I tell him, life's sweet. And we're not finished yet."

"What about Johnny? What's he doing?"

"Johnny served his time, like his father, and all the work he's had since he finished is a month on the road for the corporation. He's worse off than his father, poor Johnny is, for his father's known what it was to work regular and earn good money, but Johnny's never had a chance from the start. Some of them young chaps don't know what it is to work. Your uncle says some of 'em wouldn't know how, though I'll bet our Johnny'd work fast enough if he'd the chance. What I'm frightened of is that one o' these days he'll have to get married. If he does, then they'd have to come here. Some women I know like that. Their sons get married—or their daughters—and then they have to come and live with the old folks, and these women just boss the lot, and won't let their own daughters or daughters-in-law bring up their own babies. You see that

happening all round here, Charlie. Like bossy old gipsy women, they are. Well, it's nothing in my line, and I'm frightened to death our Johnny'll march up one fine morning with some lass he's got into trouble and they have to start a family in the next bedroom. And you can't blame 'em, can you, lad? Even if they are out o' work, they're human—they're young and they've got to have a bit o' fun somehow."

"I haven't seen Madge yet. How's she getting on?" Charlie asked.

"She's got a job now, working in a toffee shop in Churchgate. Eighteen shillings she gets, and I tell her I bet she eats another eighteen shillings-worth. We're no better off because she's working—we're worse off, because transition goes and deducts what's she making, as if she gives us every penny o' that eighteen shillings and it didn't cost anything to send a girl out to work all day and half the night. Nay, Charlie, I'm as worried about our Madge as I am about our Johnny. She says she's had enough of Slakeby—wants to go off as a waitress or something o' that sort—some of her friends have gone and they keep writing to her—and I can't blame her for wanting to go, for there's nothing here for a pretty young lass like her. Oh—yes, she's nice-looking enough, Madge is, a proper picture when she's dressed up. That's the trouble, Charlie. If she were a bit plainer I wouldn't bother so much, but she's always had the lads—men too—after her, and as her father says, she gets her ideas about life from the Hippodrome and the Electric Palace. There isn't a bit of harm in her really—but you know what they are at that age,

young lasses—not a bit o' sense in their heads—always thinking about clothes and chaps and pictures, and I don't know what might happen if she got off on her own, a long way from home. Her father won't hear of it, properly puts his foot down—sometimes them two play war with one another—but I fancy it's me that keeps her here. Who's this? Sounds like Johnny."

It was Johnny. He announced that he had brought Charlie's two bags from the station, and then asked his mother where Charlie could best find lodgings.

"I'm vexed you can't stay here, Charlie," cried his aunt. "But we simply haven't room in this house."

"That's all right," said Charlie. "I didn't expect it. We'll easily find a place just near."

His aunt spent an anxious but delightful minute tackling this problem. "Mrs. Crockit," she cried finally, in triumph. "Lives just down the street. She's a widow and only got one lad at home now, and she's a right decent little body. She'll only be too glad to get somebody, for she's been terribly hard put to it just lately to keep a home together. Has her Harry got his trousers yet?" she asked Johnny.

Johnny grinned. "Yes, I saw him in 'em yesterday. They're about three sizes too big for him, otherwise they'll do. And I believe he's getting a job either this week or next."

"Poor Mrs. Crockit," cried Aunt Nellie. "We had to laugh, but it was a shame. The only trousers her lad Harry had, a week or two back, was a pair of

moleskins, and when he went out in 'em all the other lads laughed at him and then he was so shamed he'd only go out at night. So his mother went all over trying to get him another pair o' trousers, and before she'd done she'd been to the mayor himself, telling him her lad had to have a pair of trousers. And now they've found him a pair."

"Here, that'll do," said Johnny reproachfully. "you're tircd. Isn't she, Charlie? Time she had a bit o' peace. Come on."

They had the room downstairs to themselves; Uncle Tom had gone out to do some meagre, but very necessary shopping.

"Just a minute, Johnny," said Charlie, "before we go any farther. Who is this doctor that looks after my Aunt Nellie?"

"Old Doc Inverurie, that is. Always been our doctor. Big red-headed chap and a fiery old devil—doesn't give a damn for anybody. Curses and swears at you, and if he thinks you're trying anything on, he'll boot you straight out. Quarrels with everybody—government, town council, other doctors—doesn't give a damn. But he knows this place backward, knows everybody in it, and if you ask me he's the best doctor in Slakeby. What's the idea?"

"I'd like to see him, that's all."

"What for? About my mother? What's the use? He'll tell you what he's told us—and more than once—that she ought to go into one o' them seaside hospitals or convalescent homes or whatever they are and be properly looked after, and then she'd have a chance of being all right. But all the free touches are full up—and there's hundreds waiting to

go in—and the other places want paying, and we've as much chance of paying for her as we have of going to the moon."

"Yes, I know, Johnny," said Charlie hastily.

But Johnny couldn't be stopped now. "It takes us all our time to find a pint or two o' milk and a few eggs for her, and never mind convalescent homes. I told you before, Charlie. Starvation and worry's done my mother in. We've got under two quid a week coming in, and that's counting what our Madge gives us, which isn't as much as they damn well think it is. This house costs us six and sixpence a week. Then we've coal and gas to pay for. And the clothing club. And the insurance—that's for our funerals, that is; we've to do without a bit o' extra food so's we'll get buried nicely. You deduct all that from two quid, you'll find we've about twenty-four shillings left for food and anything else we fancy. And just so we shouldn't go without, she's gone without, that's all. We've had years o' this, remember. It didn't start yesterday. That's Slakeby, and that's why my mother's lying there upstairs. It's just gone on too long for her."

"Listen to me, Johnny," said Charlie, frowning. "I'm going to see this doctor, and your mother's going wherever he says she ought to go."

"Yes, and who's going to pay for it?"

"I am."

Johnny stared at him. "But you can't do it, Charlie lad."

"Course I can. Wouldn't say I could if I couldn't. I've got the money all right—I got some given in London—"

"You're a good sort, Charlie." For a moment Johnny's face lost its twisted bitter look, and it might have been the boy of seven years before that Charlie saw.

"Let's go round to this Mrs. Crockit," said Charlie. "We'll try and see the doctor this afternoon."

## 3

Mrs. Crockit was a little quivering woman, very neat and clean and proud of her home. Her one great boast—and Charlie had not been five minutes inside the place before she made it, and he was to hear it over and over again—was that she had "kept the home together." She was like the triumphant commander of some long-besieged town that had at last been relieved, and indeed that is exactly what she was. Her husband had been a plater in one of the biggest of the local shipyards, and though he had known the slump and unemployment he had died before the town sank into a permanently depressed area; a fact that consoled his widow as she stood quivering beneath an immensely enlarged photograph of him, which looked like an enormous moustache in a mountain mist. She had two daughters, both of them married and living in more prosperous districts. She could at any time, it appeared, go and live with either of them; but she felt that she owed it to the memory of Mr. Crockit, to her own proper pride, to her son Harry, he of the moleskin trousers, to keep the home together. As she must have had to do this sometimes on pitifully

few shillings a week, she had some reason for her pride and her triumphant air. Her other passion was for tea, and one of her stock phrases was: "If I don't have my cup o' tea, you just might as well shoot me," which helped to give a fine dramatic effect to her tale of the siege of 37, Fish-net Street.

She was delighted to have a lodger for a few days. Charlie arranged to have his breakfast there and nothing else, for he saw that if he insisted upon having his other meals at his uncle's, he would have a good excuse to give them some money or, failing that, to buy plenty of food for the house. Those five hundred pounds seemed bigger than ever here in Slakeby, where people had to think in pennies. His cousin Johnny, though no sponger, had no false pride in this matter, but Charlie was afraid that his uncle, who had always been a stiff-necked independent chap, might be hurt by any suggestion of patronage, and might take it into his head to refuse to be helped. But he could risk that for this one day, anyhow, so after seeing Mrs. Crockit, he went off by himself to the nearest grocer's and butcher's, and then returned to his uncle's with a fair load of provisions.

"Nay, lad," his uncle protested, "what's the idea o' all this stuff?"

Charlie explained that he wanted to take his meals there, that he was a hearty eater, and that also he happened to have plenty of money.

To his relief, his uncle made no objection. Charlie said nothing about his plan for his aunt, preferring to leave any discussion of that until he

had seen the doctor. The two of them set to work to make the dinner, after sternly refusing to allow Aunt Nellie to come downstairs.

Madge arrived at one o'clock, and opened her eyes very wide at the sight of Charlie. She was pretty enough, in a rather delicate, faintly unhealthy sort of way, but she had a bouncing pert manner that Charlie did not care for. It did not take him five minutes to decide that his aunt had been right about her, that here was one who could get herself into trouble very quickly.

"Well, wonders never cease," she cried. "I didn't think the family hero would come to see us. Whatever made you come to this hole?"

"To see you," Charlie grinned.

"I believe you, but thousands wouldn't. We've all heard about you, y'know. Been in London, haven't you?"

"Only left it last night," said Charlie, with the air of a man who conquers vast distances.

"Here, tell us all about it," cried Madge eagerly.

He told her where he had been and what he had done, or as much as he thought she ought to know. She listened greedily.

"That'll do," his uncle broke in, finally. "You get back to your work, Madge. You've had your dinner and time's getting on."

"Oh—there's plenty of time."

"There isn't. You know very well you've been late before."

"Well—what if I have?"

"Toffee shop can wait a bit, can't it?" cried Johnny aggressively. "Eighteen bob a week for

working all the hours God sends! Let 'em wait a bit."

Their father flared up at this. "That's no way to talk. She's working, isn't she? And lucky to be working. Well then, let her do what she's paid to do, and be there i' time. It's least she can do."

For a moment it looked as if there was about to be a family quarrel; only one of many, Charlie guessed. There were here two very different attitudes, two conflicting schools of thought. His uncle had maintained, even throughout this long misery of idleness and uselessness, the severe conscientious standards of his youth; whereas his children belonged to another world, from which those standards had vanished. All this, and more, Charlie saw at once; and he understood now what kept his aunt worrying and struggling. It was she who held this family together.

"Oh—all right," cried Madge pettishly. "Anything for a quiet life. Well, I must say, Charlie, you're looking very posh. Be careful or you'll be having all the Slakeby girls running after you. We don't get so many of your sort round here now. If you find yourself in Churchgate, come in the toffee shop and give us all a treat. Ta-ta." And pulling a little hat, a shabby but impudent little hat, almost over one eye, she blew him a kiss and then hurried out.

"She's grown up a bit, hasn't she, Charlie?" said Johnny grinning.

"She's got a lot more growing up to do yet," her father growled. "She's nothing but a silly baby yet, only she doesn't know it. She will one day, though."

"Well, she belongs to the right sex," said Johnny, not without bitterness. "It's a damned sight better being a girl than a chap here i' Slakeby. They can get work where we can't. If they ever start building ships again, they'll have girls doing it. A couple o' machines and a few girls, and you can make any damn thing nowadays."

"Oh no you can't, oh no you can't. Don't get that into your head." Uncle Tom was rattled. "When they start doing proper jobs again, they'll have to have proper tradesmen to do 'em. And where they're going to find 'em, I don't know. They'll be a bit surprised wi' themselves, I'm thinking, when they want men that can use their hands properly and then can't find 'em. I know."

Johnny shook his head. "Don't need 'em any more, father. World's moved on since your day, don't forget that."

"Happen it has, but where's it moved to, answer me that?" He paused triumphantly, then turned to Charlie: "What you going to do this afternoon, lad? Like a bit of a walk round?"

Charlie said that he would, but added that he also wanted to see Dr. Inverurie.

"Well, you see a character when you see him. But what d'you want with him, lad? You're not poorly, are you?"

"Not I, Uncle. But I just want a word or two with him, that's all."

"All right then. We'll find him in about tea-time, and we can have a walk round before that. What do you say? But we'll do a bit of washing up and clearing away first. Your aunt'll be trying to

get up this afternoon, but she's not going to come down and find a lot o' mucky pots for her to do. I'll see if she's managed to get that drop o' soup down. Do her good if she has."

It was a fine afternoon when they set out for their walk round. There were plenty of Slakeby citizens out in the streets to enjoy the sunshine. Every street corner seemed to be thick with them, unemployed men, mostly shortish fellows all with caps and scarves. Charlie's uncle knew most of them, but did not stop to talk.

"There's some grand workers there, Charlie," he said, as they moved along Flitch Street towards the river. "You'll go a long way before you'll find better. You'd think something could be found for 'em to do, wouldn't you? I'll never believe there's too many good tradesmen. Look at Russia. From what they tell me they've not half enough there—don't know how to look after a machine—and this town's full o' chaps that 'ud look after machines better nor most mothers mind their babies, and yet they're all idle."

They came to a dingy corner house where a lot of men were hanging about. His uncle pointed to it. "That's commissioner's office," he explained. "We wouldn't work this Means Test game here, so they had to send a commissioner to do it for us. Chap himself's all right—does his best, I've no doubt—but it's poor dirty little job he's got to do. Docking a lad a shilling, maybe, because he's getting a shilling from the Army Reserve—that sort o' style. I'll bet they're none so particular about a penny or two up i' London, are they, Charlie? Did you notice

'em counting their ha'pennies there, lad? No, I thought not."

They went slowly down to the river, arriving at a sad little piece of waste land, opposite to the grass-grown yards. Uncle Tom began pointing out the sites of the old yards and works, and reminded Charlie of what was to be seen there when Charlie visited them as a boy.

"I was thinking about that early this morning," said Charlie. "I was standing on the bridge down there, and thinking how it 'ud all changed."

"Ay, we're redundant here," said his uncle.

"You're what?"

"Redundant's the word. There's a thing called National Shipbuilding Securities or something o' the sort, and it said 'Them yards at Slakeby's redundant,' and that was that. Finish. There'll never be another ship built here, lad. We can make our minds up about that. We're redundant, that's what we are. And you see what it looks like"—he waved an arm—"being redundant. Remember them slips, lad, with the hulls going up, and all the platers and riveters at it like mad? There's grass growing there, and you might find a few hens scratching—that's all. It's like me. I used to spend my time wi' ships' engines—a man's job—and now I just wash a few pots up See that, lad." And he pointed to a cluster of tall chimneys behind the distant empty sheds.

"Isn't that Sturks?" asked Charlie.

"It was," replied his uncle grimly. "It's nothing now. Finished. We built engines there you couldn't beat. There's Sturks engines going round the world now in ships—driving 'em good and hard too—and

they're thirty year old if they're a day, them engines. Yes, Sturks. Everybody knew Sturks engines. Finished." He seemed to be staring blindly at the distant chimneys.

"But why? What happened? Were they—what's it?—redundant too?"

His uncle said nothing for a moment. Then he began, slowly: "When I first started working there, lad, old Sturk himself was still on the job. And a hard old devil he was, too. He'd beat you down, he'd beat you down to the last penny. And then curse your eyes out. Oh—a hard old devil. But—by God! —old Sturk would never have seen them works closed down. Any rate, he'd have gone down fighting with us. But he'd two sons. They made a limited company out of it. Put a manager in. Then, as far as I can make out, one o' these clever Dicks from London bought it, lock, stock and barrel; and then they pushed their shares up and up until Sturks's five-pound shares was fetching five-and-thirty pounds. And then the slump comes—and bang! But they tell me them two sons of old Sturk were all right—sold out nicely—and very likely put it all in War Loan and whatnot—and them and their families live down London way—one of 'em's in Parliament, they tell me, Conservative, of course—as snug as you like. By this time, I bet they've never heard o' Slakeby. Pity we all couldn't have sold out, isn't it, lad? But the old man wouldn't have done that. He'd have kept them works going till he bust. Well, that's Sturks. In Memoriam. R.I.P."

They looked again at the melancholy river, which had been robbed of its trade, but not of its filth,

like Slakeby itself, which still looked as dirty as it did when every big chimney was spouting black fumes. Not that it was a very dirty place, as industrial towns go. Charlie himself, accustomed as he was to the black little towns of the Midlands, always thought of Slakeby as being comparatively clean, but now, after the West End of London, it looked dirty enough. Perhaps it was the dirt of neglect now and not that of the blacker industries. Some of the men hanging about the streets had something of the same appearance, a look of being uncared for; greasy hair and greyish skins. Slakeby reminded Charlie of towns he had seen towards the end of long strikes. There were plenty of fellows out of work in Bendworth and Utterton, but in Slakeby there were more fellows unemployed than working. A few of them had got allotments—Tom Adderson had applied for one—and some of the others attended classes, but most of them did nothing beyond attend at the Labour Exchange, the commissioner's office, and such places. The streets were filled with them, just hanging about, no money in their pockets, not enough food in their bellies or blood in their veins, seeing little hope anywhere.

"And you see, Charlie," said his uncle, as they entered Churchgate, the main street, "when once a town goes slithering down like this, everybody goes with it. It's not just engineering and shipbuilding trades that's gone here. There's dozens o' shops closed, and a lot o' them that's open is only just scratching for a living. And there's cashiers and clerks and suchlike—all out o' work. This street's

best we have, as you know yourself, and it mightn't look so bad if you look at it very sharp, but take a good look and you'll see it's gone down the hill, like rest of us. It's only these Woolworth sort o' places that's busy. Rest of it's got a ragged look, hasn't it?"

Charlie admitted that it had. Then he noticed two very imposing new corner buildings a little further down. They were both in sharp contrast to anything in their neighbourhood. He enquired what they were.

His uncle chuckled. "Let's go and have a look at one," he said, and they crossed the road.

"A bank," said Charlie.

"Ay, they're both banks. But just have a peep inside this one. It'll do your eyes good. I dare say, coming from London, you've seen this sort o' thing before, but it's a bit of an eye-opener for Slakeby, this is. Have a look."

The interior was even grander than the outside; marble and polished steel, mahogany and cut glass. "This has cost 'em a bit," said Charlie.

"Ay, and they tell me when you get right inside—manager's office and all that—it fairly takes your breath away. And the other one—another bank—is just the same. One built last year, and the other the year before." He then led Charlie away, and when they had walked twenty yards or so, he stopped and looked Charlie in the face very long and earnestly.

"Now then, lad," he began, "can you explain to me why it is that them two bank buildings catch your eye like that?"

"They might well catch your eye"

"Ay, of course they might. But what I want to know is—why are they there to catch it? Here's Slakeby—redundant, nearly finished, yards dismantled, works closed down, trade gone, and everybody either out o' work or complaining they're on their last legs. That's right, isn't it? And it's as bad—or nearly as bad—everywhere you go round here; and it's not so much better anywhere you go. Trade's bad and men's unemployed all over the country. Isn't that right, lad?"

"That's right, Uncle. It's the same everywhere I've been."

"Well then, how in the name of thunder can them banks afford to build places like that? If they're on our side, and mucking in wi' us, then they ought to be having a big slump too, not knowing where to find a coat o' paint for their offices and cashiers walking about wi' their shirts hanging out o' their breeches backsides. Instead o' that, they're building marble palaces. They've got more money than they know what to do with, else they wouldn't be spending it like that."

"They must have, Uncle. Why should they go and put up new places here?"

"And if that's the case," his uncle continued sternly, "then they're not mucking in wi' us. It's '*Damn you Jack, I'm all right' wi' them.* It seems to me, lad, the worse off we are, the better off they are. By the time us in Slakeby's trying to keep body and soul together by living on turnip tops, they'll be wondering whether to gold-plate yon' building. At the finish, Slakeby'll consist of a cemetery five mile long, two big workhouses for them that's left

alive, and a dozen banks twenty storeys high and covered wi' diamonds."

Charlie agreed. "Seeing the state you're in here, I call them two bank buildings an insult."

"That's right. Throwing it in your face. And they've just gone and given the game away here, lad. Now I'm not like some of our Johnny's Bolshie pals, I don't pretend to understand how things work. Every time I try and study it out, I get my brains fairly addled. But them that says we're governed for the benefit o' the banks seem to me to know what they're talking about. We've prooft here in this street. Banks go up while works close down. Well, I say fair's fair and let's have turn and turn about. Let's try the opposite o' what we've done so far, so that banks go down and works go up. Let's have some marble engineering works and gold-plated shipyards. And we'll have a dole for bankers, and see if we can't give 'em a bit more than they give us."

"I met a queer little chap in London—a very rich fellow," Charlie began, and went on to describe his encounter with Sir Edward Catterbird, who seemed to believe there was a curse on working only with money. Probably a bit mad. Uncle Tom listened eagerly, and Charlie was delighted to see that his uncle was now far more like his old self than he had been during the morning, when it looked as if he was rapidly dwindling into a bewildered hopeless old man. And he had yet to learn what Charlie proposed to do for Aunt Nellie. When he did know, he would almost certainly recover a lot of lost ground. When they arrived at Dr. Inverurie's wait-

ing-room, which was well filled, it was tea-time, and Charlie, relieved at having an excuse to get rid of his uncle, insisted that it would be better for him to wait on there alone and for his uncle to return home. Charlie had three-quarters of an hour to wait, during which time he was entertained by hearing the details of two major operations and the symptoms, very painful and suspiciously resembling one or two mysterious twinges of his own, of an acute gastric trouble endured, almost enjoyed, by a man with a bright green muffler.

Dr. Inverurie was a huge elderly man, who looked rather like a retired heavy-weight champion, and had a curiously hot angry face. Even his eyes, moist and reddish, seemed to have nearly reached boiling point. But they gave Charlie a quick shrewd glance as he entered.

"I don't know you, do I?" he roared. "Well, what's wrong with you? I should say—nothing."

"That's right," said Charlie easily. "There isn't."

"Well, that's a change. What do you want?"

Charlie explained, as quickly and briefly as he could, for it seemed as if at any moment this enormous man would explode.

"Just a minute. I must have a talk to you. How many have we got still out there?" He shouted, and a young woman in nurse's uniform appeared. "See who's still out there, Lilian. Boot out the old hands, and let me see anybody worth seeing quickly." He turned to Charlie. "Wait until I've got through with these, then I can give you a few minutes and we can talk."

So Charlie returned to the waiting-room, which

seemed to smell of dirt and disease and misery, and heard the doctor bellowing distantly at the remaining few who were allowed to see him. After a further quarter of an hour he was shown again into the consulting room. This time Dr. Inverurie was more at ease and was puffing out clouds of smoke from a large blackened pipe. "Smoke if you like," he shouted. "Better to smoke. Stinks in here. The human race, especially when it's not very well, does stink."

After lighting a cigarette, a thing he never remembered doing before in a doctor's presence, Charlie returned to the object of his visit.

"You know what's the matter with Mrs. Adderson?" said the doctor. "I don't mean according to the text-books and the diagrams. I mean something you can understand. Like a lot of women round here, she's suffering from the effects of years of over-work, constant worry, and mal-nutrition. If she spent her share of what the family gets on herself she'd probably still suffer from mal-nutrition, but of course she hasn't done that. She's gone short. It may have gone too far. But what she needs, urgently, is what she can't possibly get in her own home. Complete rest, careful diet and some treatment, and possibly—we can't tell until she's been X-rayed—a little operation. I see people every day who are like that. Can't do anything. Can't save them. Their number's up, and perhaps it's just as well, because they've nothing to live for." And he looked challengingly at Charlie, who told himself that that statement was a bit thick.

"Well, never mind all them," said Charlie

doggedly. "My aunt's not one of 'em. She's going to have her chance."

"All right then. You say you can pay for her to go into a nursing home or into a hospital as a paying patient?"

"I think so. Least, I can try. What'll it cost?"

Dr. Inverurie thought a moment. "Might be done for as little as forty pounds. Might be nearer a hundred. You can't tell at this stage, but I'll promise you that it'll be done as cheaply as possible. I've known Mrs. Adderson a long time—brought her two children into the world—and she's a fine little woman. I've a great respect for her. That any good to you?"

"Yes, I can do it all right. When can she go in?"

"I'll arrange about all that, and let you know—perhaps to-morrow, perhaps the day after. When I've got all the arrangements made, I'll come round and talk to them myself. You've not told her, have you?"

"No."

"Quite right. Say nothing until I know exactly when and where she can go. By the way—though it's no business of mine—I'd like to know how you can afford this little luxury—say, sixty pounds? Sweep-stake? Or smash and grab?" He grinned broadly. "I don't care a damn, but I'd like to know out of sheer curiosity if you made your money honestly."

Charlie gave him an answer he didn't expect. "No," said Charlie, "I don't know that I did come by it honestly."

The doctor gave a great bellow of laughter, and what with his roars, his smoke, and the red glow of him, he was like a volcano in eruption.

"A newspaper in London—the *Daily Tribune*," Charlie continued solemnly, "called me a hero—a wonder hero—and then gave me five hundred pounds. And as I'm not a hero—not even an ordinary one, let alone a wonder hero—I doubt if I'm entitled to the money."

The doctor grinned at him. "I remember something about that. A few days ago, wasn't it? Lot of damned nonsense, I thought it. Fuss about nothing."

"Oh—I agree. They started it—not me."

"Well, take everything they'll give you, so long as they don't want anything in return for it—and people generally do. If they hadn't started playing the fool with you, then Mrs. Adderson wouldn't be able to have her treatment. Look at it that way."

"My aunt says you've been very good to them."

"Good to them! Certainly not. Never good to anybody—as you call it. Don't believe in it. I'm a damned hard-working old medical hack, that's what I am, and not a philanthropist. But I like your aunt. She's a good type. Lot of women like that round here—salt o' the earth. Her husband's a good type, too. Old-fashioned species, of course, that—solid craftsman, earn every penny paid him, scorn to do a poor job, and tell you go to hell out of it if you tried to interfere with him. If Russia had had a million Tom Addersons, she'd have a different tale to tell now. Just what Russia needs. Here we've got 'em and can't use 'em. We're letting 'em rot now. Tom Adderson will never set a finger on a ship's engine again. His time's past."

"I think he knows that," said Charlie. "He was

telling me about Sturks this afternoon."

"And that lad of his—what's his name?—"

"Johnny."

"Yes, Johnny. What's going to happen to him? No work. No prospects. But what'll happen very soon is that he'll line up with some of his pals—all Reds—and some big over-fed policeman will crack him over the head with a truncheon. Next thing after that he'll find himself in gaol. After that—God knows! And that little girl—pretty little thing that, but no stamina and no sense. She'll get away from home soon—waitress or something of that kind—and unless she's lucky enough to fall in with some young male half-wit who fancies her and marries her at once, she'll just get mauled about and find herself with a baby coming and get into a miserable mess and then—but perhaps you're going to marry her yourself, are you?"

"Not me," replied Charlie decisively. "Madge isn't my style at all."

"Very sensible of you. Well, there's the beginnings of a sketch of a family history. Unless a few miracles happen, your Addersons will be worse off in a year or two's time than they are now; Tom'll have lost any self-respect he has left; the boy—Johnny—will have lost his liberty, the girl her virginity, perhaps her respectability—and meanwhile we're planning to patch up poor Mrs. Adderson so she can watch 'em all going to hell. Nice thing to do, isn't it?" he roared.

"I'll chance it," said Charlie. "After all, doctor, neither you nor nobody else knows what's going to happen."

"Don't I? I can tell you what's happening here. We're breeding a generation—conceived in worry and misery, brought up on scraps—like nothing you've seen before. C<sub>3</sub>? C<sub>16</sub>, that's what they'll be. I hate to bring the poor little devils into the world. And this isn't just happening in Slakeby—though by God we've got more than our share of it. But it's happening all over this island. And all over Europe—and America. What a childhood! What a prospect! What a generation! They talk about wars wiping us out—well, sometimes I think the sooner we're all wiped out the better. I don't know why I'm trying to patch people up."

"Well, it's your job, isn't it?"

"It is, and that's why I keep on with it, following my nose. Do you ever think about this social system of ours? Do you realise, for instance, that every time some fellow thinks he'll benefit the human race by inventing a machine to make boots quicker and cheaper, all he succeeds in doing is to put still more men out of work, so that they can't buy boots at all? Every new invention, every idea for increased production, goes and empties the larder for some poor devils. It's so arranged that it's practically impossible to benefit the community at large. Man, we're like the mouse when it spins—the higher, the fewer. We're all bewitched, and here we're dying by inches of it."

"Well, what are you going to do?" asked Charlie.  
"Turn Bolshie?"

"If I thought it would get us out of this, I'd turn Bolshie to-morrow," roared the doctor. "But it won't. And I don't like Bolshevism. I don't like

Soviets, committees, fools who win elections, officials, half-witted comrades and damned interference with everything and everybody. I don't like public ownership of property. What the public owns, nobody owns; like something between a museum and a lost dog. There's only one thing, young man, that the government should look after that it doesn't look after now—and that's money. Try another financial system. It couldn't be worse than this one. Why, if I'd my way, I'd give every unemployed man four pounds a week to-morrow and make him spend every penny of it."

"You couldn't do it," cried Charlie, who did not always forget what he read in the papers.

"Oh couldn't I? And why?"

"Well," Charlie stammered, "we—er—couldn't stand it. I mean to say, the country'd go bankrupt, wouldn't it?"

"All right then, let it go bankrupt, let it go bankrupt. We're supposed to be solvent now, and look at us. Let's try bankruptcy, for a change. We'll have grass growing in the City of London, just as we have it here in the shipyards. But listen to me a minute, my boy, and then you can go back to London and tell something to the people there who think you're a hero. The world can produce like mad. It started during the war and now it can't stop. Every year, new machines, churning out more stuff. In South Wales, for instance, they've plenty of coal but no coffee, whereas in Brazil they're using coffee to burn instead of coal. Why?"

"Beats me," Charlie confessed. "Beats me every time."

"Because we can produce but can't consume, and we can't consume, not because we've stopped eating and wearing clothes and wanting things, but simply because we haven't got the money. The counters haven't been given out properly—there aren't enough of them—and so the game's slowing up. Like playing poker with chips made of melting ice. We've either got to stop the money game altogether—which would be damned inconvenient—though if you've ever met a very rich man, you'll find that he manages almost entirely on a system of credit and hardly touches a bob—or failing that, we've to create fluid money, going briskly into circulation among consumers, and stop talking silly nonsense about gold standards and listening open-mouthed to bankers. The next time you're asked your opinion about anything for the Daily What-is-it—the *Tribune*, you shout that at the top of your voice—don't forget that—at the top of your voice—or they won't hear you. And if they want to know who told you, say it's that nice Dr. Inverurie, of Slakeby, who's looked upon so favourably by the Ministry of Health because of his frequent observations on the subject of unemployment and mal-nutrition. And now, if you were ten times the hero you look or are, you'd still have to get out of this surgery, because I've got to go and see about thirty patients, half of 'em shamming and the other half dying. But I'll arrange for Mrs. Adderson to go where they'll do her some good and won't do your bank balance too much harm. You look out for me there in a day or two."

"I will," said Charlie, getting up to go.

Dr. Inverurie gave him a large friendly grin.  
"You're all right, even if the *Daily Tribune* has been  
making a fuss about you. I knew you'd got some  
good stuff in you when I first caught sight of that  
sandy top of yours. And now—outside quick, before  
I suggest an operation and take the rest of your  
money away."

Charlie walked back to Fishnet Street feeling that his afternoon had been well spent. He was tired now. He had gone short of sleep in London, and last night had been a very broken affair of cramped dozing in the train, ending at dawn. London was an immense way off, had dwindled into a glittering speck; he seemed to have spent weeks in Slakeby. All the people he had met in London, with one exception, were already very shadowy. The exception, solid and bright in his recollection, was Ida Chatwick, the girl from Pondersley. But, he reflected, with the rising self-pity of a tired man, she would be busy now turning herself into somebody important and forgetting he had ever existed. That kind of importance didn't seem to matter so much now that he was here, far away from the *Daily Tribune* office and the New Cecil Hotel; but it was no joke being forgotten. He thought, for one mad moment, of writing to her, telling her what had happened to him, but he soon remembered that he was not good at letters and would probably only make a fool of himself. Could he talk about her to his Aunt Nellie? No, he couldn't, he decided at once. Nevertheless, he did.

Dr. Inverurie was out in his calculations. It did not take him a couple of days to arrange for Aunt Nellie to go away, it took him a week, and it was the following Monday afternoon exactly when he appeared at 18, Fishnet Street to announce the news. The delay was not his fault, as he was careful to point out to Charlie, who never left him alone for more than two days at a time. It had not been as easy as he had thought it would be to find the right place. Meanwhile, Charlie had an uneasy week of Slakeby, uneasy chiefly because he was anxious to get his aunt away, but also because he felt himself to be in a strange insecure sort of position. He was no longer Charlie Habble with a job at the A.C.P. place in Utterton. He was no longer the Charles Habble, the provincial hero, who had splashed about in London at the expense of the *Daily Tribune* and some of its advertisers. He was not the young Charlie who used to stay here in Slakeby, for he was different and so was the town. He was a new chap altogether, a mysterious man of money, quite a large imposing figure among people who had to think about every penny, but to himself, especially when he was by himself, he was a bewildered uprooted fellow neither at work nor properly on holiday, who did not know what would happen next, who had arrived somewhere in misty mid-air. He wrote to Hughson at the *Daily Tribune* office, giving his address in Slakeby and describing briefly what was happening; but he received no

reply. The *Daily Tribune*, which he still read every morning, never mentioned his name once, and made no attempt to get into touch with him. Charlie came to the conclusion finally that the *Tribune* people were annoyed because he had left London suddenly like that, and were waiting for him to return there before they did anything about him. He had no intention of leaving Slakeby, however, until he had seen Aunt Nellie safely packed off for her treatment; and he explained this in his letter to Hughson. So he waited; for Dr. Inverurie; for the *Daily Tribune* to do something; for a reply from Hughson.

This uneasiness was below the surface, which was smooth and pleasant enough. Mrs. Crockit was delighted with him as a lodger, and morning and night happily quivered before him as she gave him the minutest details of the experiences and tastes of the late Mr. Crockit, who, it seemed, had had a passion for steak pudding, old ale, draughts, and racing pigeons. The advent of so nicely-spoken, well-dressed a lodger as Charlie, who paid his three and sixpence a night for bed and breakfast without a murmur, seemed to little Mrs. Crockit a triumphant proof of the value of keeping her home together, almost a reward from heaven for her struggles. And as, in addition, her Harry, a shambling awkward hobbledehoy whose every sudden movement threatened to wreck the precious home, was actually starting work, she was happier than she had been for years, and never stopped quivering and beaming at Charlie. The excitement of his visit had done his aunt a lot of good, though she was apt to overire herself. She insisted upon getting up now, sparkled

and laughed, and called herself "Charlie's Aunt," after the funny piece she so well remembered seeing in the fantastically prosperous old days when you went to theatres. It added enormously to her pleasure, too, to see the way in which the other members of her family benefited by Charlie's visit. There was more food on the table, there were some little treats and excursions, and there was somebody fresh—and famous—for them all to talk to. And then there was the day out, the first she had had for a long long time.

This was on the Thursday, which was a lovely day of untroubled May sunshine. Charlie remembered a little trip they had made years before inland into one of the dales, where there were thick woods, a castle, a grand waterfall. He suggested going there again, and Aunt Nellie caught fire at once. It would have been cruel to suggest that it might be too tiring for her. Besides, the weakness of the body was nothing when compared with that blaze of the spirit. A motor-coach was running up into that dale this very Thursday, and so off they went, Charlie and his uncle and aunt. There were only four other people in the motor-coach, which was a tremendous affair, with seats like feather beds. Aunt Nellie, miraculously restored for the time being, bobbed up and down, pointed, stared and chattered like a little girl. Uncle Tom, dressed with almost painful care in what remained of his best, was solemnly happy. In five minutes they had left the dull little streets behind and were moving along roads bright with laburnum and flowering chestnut. Aunt Nellie stared happily at the fields and the farm-houses.

"Daisies and buttercups," she cried. "They haven't gone off the gold standard, have they, Charlie? That's one thing about the country. They may have their bad times—"

"They do," said her husband. "And they never stop grumbling—famous for it."

"Well, they've no need, because even if they're not doing so well, they've still got the country, haven't they? Nobody goes and takes away all the green grass and them little streams and the cows and the clover. But in Slakeby, if you're not making any money, what is there? Just dirty bricks, that's all. I'd rather be out o' work among the buttercups and daisies. That's right, isn't it, Charlie?"

Like most townsfolk, all three of them were romantics at heart, and now they looked out at the fresh green world and dreamed for a moment of an arcadian life among these fields. There was no sign that Slakeby and its companion towns existed. The eternal loveliness of the Northern countryside was about them. The road dipped into the shadows of deep woods; the river went glittering through the tangle of leaves; and bare hills began to rise in the distance. They were now in the dale itself, and Aunt Nellie pointed out all the places where they had been before, like a happy, excited ghost returned to the world. There was a glimmer of blue-bells in the woods. The river gurgled about its stones, where Uncle Tom and his friend Fred Robinson had once caught trout, and then sank into the gold and green haze of its glens. The noble ruin of the castle was unchanged. Then, at last, the waterfall came tumbling and thundering from

the high moors, and they sat entranced in the mist of spray. They had tea in a whitewashed room, so clean, so fresh that Aunt Nellie closed her eyes in ecstasy, and in one deep breath took it all in as if she meant to carry it away for ever. They ate boiled ham and stewed fruit and cream and curd tarts; and afterwards, while the men smoked outside in the sunshine, Aunt Nellie had a grand reminiscent talk with the woman of the house. The peace of the evening descended upon them, and they returned to Slakeby like innocent conquerors.

"You're tired, y'know, Nellie," said Uncle Tom.

"I know I am, but I don't care. I feel better for it, I do really. My skin feels different, doesn't yours? I smell different to myself, if you know what I mean. Oh—Charlie lad—it's been lovely. Hasn't it, Tom? We are lucky, aren't we?"

Although Johnny was not a member of this expedition, Charlie saw a great deal of him that week. Sometimes he went along with him to the local workmen's club, which was crowded with chaps playing cribbage and snooker or arguing ferociously about the state of the country. Most of them, like Johnny, were unemployed, and could pay no subscription. Uncle Tom did not go to the club, most of whose members he denounced as a lot of noisy, ignorant fellows. His one anxiety now, apart from his wife, was to get one of the small allotments. These allotments meant not only a supply of vegetables, more than enough for the owner's family, but also a return of self-respect for such men as Tom Adderson, who bitterly resented their idleness and uselessness. You could tell at a glance

which of the older men had been lucky enough to get an allotment, for they looked healthier and happier than the rest. Johnny and the younger lot did not care about the allotments. They wanted a full-time job at their own trades, and cursed a government that did not know how to provide them with such jobs or how to make any move that would make such jobs even a remote possibility. Another difference between Johnny and his father, the younger generation and the older, was that Johnny and his friends would scrape together a few pence and spend them at the dogs or at the cheap boxing-shows that were popular in the neighbourhood. This annoyed Uncle Tom and his kind, who argued that these boys could not afford it and that all this gambling and boxing gave a bad impression. To this Johnny and his friends replied that without a bit of pleasure life was simply not worth living at all, and that if they chose to go without food to have sixpence on a dog or to see some fighting, it was their business and nobody else's. Charlie did not care very much about greyhound-racing, but he liked boxing, and he took Johnny to a couple of fights, one in the open air and the other, on Friday night, in the Slakeby boxing stadium, which had been somewhat roughly conjured out of an empty warehouse. They went to this Friday night show as supporters of a promising local lightweight, young Billy Grig. Slakeby and its neighbouring towns produced a lot of boxing aspirants, lads who would hammer one another for eight rounds or so for ten shillings or a pound, many of them so poor that they could not even afford boxing-shoes and would go into the

ring in their stockinginged feet. Of these lads, who, though badly equipped and trained and sometimes half-starved, could fight like tigers, young Billy Grig was the best. Charlie had met him with Johnny, and found him a tallish, mumbling, shamefaced lad of only eighteen, who did not look any different from most of the other local hobbledehoys, just another Harry Crockit. But on Friday night, in the crowded, smoky, noisy ex-warehouse, he saw a very different Billy Grig. The boy was down to fight an older and much more experienced lightweight from Birmingham, a man who had faced some of the men with big names in London and Paris and Milan, and had only been outpointed by some of the best of them. This Birmingham fellow came into the ring first; he was short, thick-set, tough; and as soon as he saw him, Charlie felt sorry for the Slakeby boy. But Billy Grig, when he entered the ring, gave no signs of being sorry for himself. Gone was the shamefaced, mumbling lad in the old suit and the scarf. He was calm and confident, and good to look at, with long, sloping shoulders and an easy ripple of muscle as he moved. He raised a hand to the roaring crowd and then sat in his corner like a champion. The Birmingham man was very artful, an old hand, and he covered so well that it looked at first as if Billy's longer reach and exquisite foot-work would be little use to him. In the first two rounds, Birmingham landed some very nasty jabs to the body. But Billy Grig, or the scornful young demi-god pretending to be Billy Grig, never blinked an eyelid. There was something strangely superbly masterful about him. And in the middle of the third

round, there was a sharp crack, and Birmingham was rolling on the floor, and it was several minutes before he was brought out of his agonised dream of a fight to realise that it was all over for him. Billy Grig, after gravely examining his late opponent, merely raised his two hands in reply to his yelling townsfolk, then ran off to disguise himself once more as the mumbling, shamefaced lad that Charlie had met.

"Johnny, if Billy Grig goes on at this rate, he's bound to be a champion," cried Charlie, with enthusiasm. "Why, in a year or two, there'd be nobody to stand up to him."

"I told you that, but you wouldn't believe me," said Johnny. "Trouble is, his mother doesn't like him fighting—he's her youngest—and she's playing war all the time. He's frightened to death of her, poor Billy is. If they didn't want the money so badly, he'd never get a chance to fight; and I'll bet if somebody takes him up to train him properly, she won't have it and stops him going. And he'd never dare go without she let him go. They all pick on him at home."

"You're a queer lot up here," said Charlie, grinning. "I always said so."

Actually, he did not think that they themselves were queer, but he felt all the time that theirs was a queer fate, for now they found themselves living in a large town that was practically finished. His own places, Bendworth, Utterton, had their share of unemployed and people working on short time, and knew what it was to see firms close down altogether; but they were only going through a bad period, one

felt, just as they had done once or twice before. But Slakeby seemed to be completely done for. All its biggest works were closed for good and all, and no new works had been started. Nobody was going to start anything in a big way there. As Uncle Tom explained, the rates were too high. These people could build ships and make ships' engines, but there was no chance of anybody building any more ships or making any more ships' engines in Slakeby. And there seemed no chance of their being wanted anywhere else to do the work at which they were all so highly skilled. They were all ready to turn to other trades, but no other trades wanted them. So what were they to do? What was Slakeby to do? Up to now, Charlie had thought that he knew something about unemployment and the big slump, but it was this week in Slakeby that made him realise how little he had really known about it. He was bewildered and angry in turn. If for seven years England had not been able to provide men like Tom Adderson with anything to do, then obviously England was in a damned bad way. He tried to read the Parliamentary news, but what he gathered from it seemed to have about as close a relation to the realities of Slakeby as the game of Gathering Nuts in May. He began to agree with his Cousin Johnny about the politicians. It was a pity Parliament didn't meet sometimes at the end of Fishnet Street instead of within half a mile of the New Cecil Hotel. For the first time in his life he began seriously to question the whole system; his own queer experience helped, so did this week in Slakeby, including, as it did, not only his own observations, but a whole

host of disturbing remarks by the doctor and his uncle and his cousin; and all together they left him bewildered, but determined to see further into this sad muddle. That was one thing this visit did for him. It was not the only thing.

## 5

On the following Monday, then, Dr. Inverurie marched into the house. "Now, Mrs. Adderson," he began at once, "you know very well that you're a sick woman. Wait a minute, wait a minute, I'm talking now. I'm going to send you away, where you can get proper treatment. You're going to Frentlands, over on the coast. Fine place. I've arranged everything."

Aunt Nellie, for once, could only stare. Her husband had to reply. "Nay, you haven't. You know very well, doctor, we can't pay. Can't get blood out of a stone."

"Charlie's going to pay," cried Johnny, who could keep this to himself no longer. "He told me."

"Charlie!"

"That's all right, auntie."

"Nay, wait a minute, lad, it isn't."

"Now then, Adderson, stop that," the doctor roared. "Of course, your nephew can pay. He can afford it. Damn it, he's richer than I am. That's settled. And everything else is settled, too. I warn the whole boiling of you that if you start making difficulties about this, I don't come into this house again, not even to sign your death certificates."

"But I don't need to go away now," cried Aunt Nellie. "Look at me, doctor. Aren't I better? And I've been gadding about with Charlie here all last week—up to the Falls and all over."

"Yes, of course. A bit of excitement's kept you up, that's all. Where's that pulse? Shocking. Yes, a shocking pulse."

"Besides, who's going to look after—"

"They're going to look after themselves, they're not babies. Do you want them to be waiting hand and foot on you? Well, if you don't, get away and be made into a fit woman again, and then you look after them all to your heart's content. Now no more silly talk. Do you think I go ringing up half the country, do you think your nephew comes down here from London, just to hear you talking nonsense. If you're ready at half-past six, I'll run you over myself; I have to pay a call that way. And I'm just taking you, mind—not the family. Half-past six."

Tom Adderson took him by the arm and said anxiously: "Will she be all right?"

"All right! She'll have the time of her life. It's where we all ought to be going. I want a word with this young man now." He hustled Charlie through the door and out into the street. "She couldn't be going to a better place. They've a new treatment, too—very successful."

"She's been a lot better since I came," said Charlie.

The doctor snorted. "She's not. Simply excitement. Overworking her heart." He looked steadily at Charlie. "We can't work miracles, you know.

Jolly, who runs Frentlands, is a brilliant fellow. If it can be done, he'll do it. If it can't, don't blame him, don't blame me, don't blame nature—blame this damned idiotic world we're living in, which just takes a high-spirited, conscientious little woman like that and wrings her neck as if she was a chicken for the pot."

"What about the money?"

"Blast the money! We invented money for our convenience, and now it's round our necks like a millstone. Well, here's my card. Write to me when you leave here and let me know where you can be found. I don't think you're going to bilk us—"

"I'm not."

"Well, I'm assuming you're not now. Let me have your address. And stop any silly talk in there. You've got one case off my mind, though it would take Rockefeller himself to get all of 'em off. No, he couldn't do it. Well, good luck."

He found he had a lot of talking to do when he returned to the house. Johnny was shouting at his parents, who seemed to him crazy not to fall in at once with this admirable scheme. Aunt Nellie was frightened of leaving them, and frightened, too, at the thought of the possible expense to Charlie. Her husband was annoyed because nothing had been said to him before, and relieved his feelings by shouting back at Johnny. There was nothing for it, Charlie saw, but to take charge of the situation, which he promptly did, first explaining in detail what the doctor had said to him and then pointing out that he could well afford to pay for this treatment, and that he would be aggrieved if his offer should be re-

fused. That settled it. Aunt Nellie would go to Frentlands at half-past six with Dr. Inverurie.

She spent the intervening hours half-laughing, half-crying. She laughed at the thought of her husband and Johnny looking after the house. She cried at the thought of leaving them, and because Charlie had been so kind.

"I don't know whether you're a hero or not, Charlie," she began.

"I'm not," he put in hastily; and meant it.

"But I know this. You're a good lad, and if this world was a right place—and I used to think it was, but I'm beginning to have my doubts—but if it was a right place, you'd have a good, happy life in it. I hope you do, lad, and never want for anything. And now don't say your poor old auntie can't make a speech. Look at your uncle wi' that bag. I'll bet there isn't a whole pot or pan in the house time I get back."

"You've not got to bother your head about us," said her husband earnestly. "Has she, Johnny?"

"No, 'course she hasn't. Just take it easy. That's what doctor said, isn't it, Charlie?"

Charlie said it was.

"Don't you worry," she laughed. "I'll get that fat and idle you'll have to wait on me the rest o' your lives."

"Car's here," Johnny announced.

She turned and looked steadily at her husband. "It's all right, isn't it, Tom lad?"

"All right, Nellie. Just see you mend, that's all."

"You'll miss me, won't you?"

"Not we."

"Nay, you big, clumsy piece o' nothing, what a thing to say to a woman! Here, I'm off."

And that was their good-bye. What was Dr. Inverurie thinking as he started the car? Was he thinking how wonderful it was that in a few weeks Aunt Nellie would be restored to health; was he thinking that with a heart as weak as that it was touch and go, and that she might be seeing Fishnet Street for the last time; or was he thinking not about her at all, but about the Ministry of Health and the Means Test and the bankers and the economic system? Charlie couldn't tell.

When Madge came home, an hour later, and learned what had happened, the first thing she did was to give Charlie a large smacking lip-sticky kiss. The second thing was to announce that she would now make arrangements to leave home.

"Don't talk silly," said her father.

"I'm not talking silly. I tell you, now that my mother's fixed up—thanks to Charlie—I'm off. That's all that kept me, you might as well know that. I wouldn't go while my mother seemed so poorly. But now I can go, and I *am* going."

"Where?"

"Well, to begin with, out o' Slakeby. That's the chief thing. I tell you, Father, it's more dead than alive now. Isn't it, Charlie? What is there for me to do here? Eighteen bob a week in the toffee-shop, and that's about as far as you get. You can't get a good job for yourself. And most of the chaps are out o' work. And what's going to happen to you if you stay here? You find yourself married, with a baby, living in your chap's mother's little back bed-

room—all on the dole. No fear! Besides, this place gives me the pip. It's half dead—and I'm not going to die with it, thank you."

"So now we know," said her father dryly.

"Yes, now you do know." Madge was sulkily defiant.

He flared up. "Well, we don't, d'you see. Talking to me like that! Who d'you think you are? Just out o' your teens and you begin—"

"Well, I'm old enough to know my own mind," Madge shouted.

"No, you're not—you daft little ape. That's just what you're not. You don't know you're born yet. And your place is here—with your mother and me."

"My place is where I can do best for myself," she retorted. "I've thought a lot about this, let me tell you. You've got to look after yourself in this world. If you don't, nobody else will. And I'm going to look after myself, thank you. I know what I'm doing."

"Know what you're doing—you big baby! I'd like to take a strap to your backside."

"You touch me—that's all. Just touch me!"

This was too much for Tom Adderson. He gave her a sharp slap on the face.

She was quiet for a second. Then she said: "That settles it," turned away, burst into a storm of tears, and ran upstairs.

Her father, suddenly white and shaking, a miserable, elderly man, sat down, muttering: "I oughtn't to ha' done that, I oughtn't to ha' done that."

Charlie said nothing. He did not know what to say, had not known for the last minute or two even

where to look. It was his uncle who spoke first.

"If they really want to go," he said slowly, "there's no stopping 'em. And she'll go now, she'll go now all right. And what her mother's going to say, I don't know."

"You can't blame her for wanting to go, uncle," said Charlie. "After all, she's right. What is there for her to do here?"

"It's her home, isn't it?"

"Yes, but things is different now."

"You mean," said his uncle bitterly, "that now we're all on the scrap-heap and can't earn a living, you can't call it a home. That it? Happen you're right, happen you're right."

"I didn't mean that." Charlie protested.

"Nay, you did, lad."

"She's got to do the best for herself, hasn't she? And she can't do it here. A girl's either got to find a job these days or get married. She seems to think she can get a much better job outside, and I expect she can. And if she wants to get married, she's likely to do better for herself away from here. You don't want to see her forced to marry one of Johnny's pals."

"That I don't. But her mother and me think that if she goes, she'll get herself into trouble."

"She might and then she might not," said Charlie, who knew more about Madge now than he had done a week ago. "But she's just as likely—more likely, I think—to get into trouble—all sorts o' trouble—here than somewhere else. I've seen a thing or two since I came here, uncle."

Madge came down now, wearing her hat and with

far too much powder on her face. She made for the door without a word.

"Here, Madge," her father began awkwardly, "I'm sorry I hit you."

"So am I," she retorted, and left him staring and wincing.

There was a silence.

"She'll never go to-night." And he looked enquiringly at Charlie.

"Not she," Charlie declared. "She's only gone to talk it over with her pal. She'll not make a move till she's got a job somewhere, you can bet on that. So take it easy, uncle."

They sat and smoked in silence for some minutes, during which Charlie began wondering what he ought to do now. So far he had only been concerned about getting his aunt away; now that she had gone, he could think about himself. He had had no reply from Hughson. Was the *Daily Tribune* waiting for him to reappear in London? Oddly enough, it was Johnny who settled it. Johnny, who had left the house when his mother went off in the car, now came back for some cigarettes he had forgotten.

"They talk about Russia," Johnny began, after he had found the cigarettes, "but they're just as bad here. Freedom—by God!"

"Hello!" his father growled. "What's got you now?"

"One o' the lads just told me—it's in the paper to-night—that they've just gone and pinched a fellow who was up this way talking to us a little while since. They nabbed him in London—your place, Charlie—

and not really for doing anything, just because he's a Red. It's only about a month since he was up here talking to us. Now they've got him." And he sauntered to the door.

"What's his name?" asked Charlie idly.

Johnny turned at the door. "Kibworth," he replied, and was gone before he had time to observe what a bombshell that name had exploded in the room.

## 6

"Kibworth," Charlie repeated, staring at his uncle but not seeing him. "Kibworth."

"What's the matter, lad? Do you know him?"

"Yes, in a way."

"Well, what of it? Nothing to get upset about, is it? Take no notice of our Johnny. I expect this chap's done something he oughtn't to have done."

Charlie did not reply. He seemed curiously dazed, and so his uncle decided to change the subject.

"You know, lad," he began, "I didn't want to say anything in front of the doctor and your aunt—and I suppose you know what you're doing—but are you sure you can afford to pay out for your aunt like this?—I mean to say, these jobs cost a bit, y'know, lad."

"That's all right, uncle. I can afford it."

"It's right good of you to say so, lad. They gave you some money in London, didn't they?"

"Yes," said Charlie bleakly, "they gave me—five hundred pounds."

"Five hundred pound! Nay! Who did?"

"The paper did—the *Daily Tribune*."

"I see. Oh well—five hundred's a flea-bite to them, I expect. Still—it's a lot o' money. Plenty o' chaps has done surprising things—saving life and property and all that—and not seen five pound, let alone five hundred. Mind you, Charlie, I'm not saying you didn't deserve it. I'm sure you did. Because a lot o' good things has gone without reward, that's no reason to say you didn't deserve all you got—ay, and more beside."

"But you see, uncle," said Charlie desperately, "I didn't."

"What are you talking about, lad?"

"I didn't do it. I didn't do anything."

"Here, steady on. You must have done."

"No, I didn't."

"But how in the name o' thunder!—"

"Listen, uncle, just a minute. Let me think." And he had to think hard, to force himself back to that night, which had been pushed under the surface of his memory, deliberately put out of the way.

"I suppose I really knew all along," he announced in a flat voice, "that he must have done it."

"Who? What are you talking about?"

"That chap that Johnny just mentioned. Kibworth."

"Here, Charlie, are you going off your head? For God's sake, let's get this straight. Where does this Kibworth come in?"

"It's all such a mix-up."

Tom looked hard at him. "There's nothing dishonest in all this business, is there, lad?" he de-

manded sternly, becoming once more the Uncle Tom of Sturks, of whom Charlie used to be in such awe.

"I'll explain it, uncle, I'll explain it all. Just give me a minute to think." He had his minute and used it well, going back to that Tuesday night. But first he had to give an account of the events earlier that day, when he met the inventor Finnigan Otley and then Kibworth, and spent the afternoon with them. This he proceeded to do, and went on to describe how Kibworth, on the run and wet through, came to him for shelter.

"He didn't want me to be responsible, you see, uncle," he continued, "and so he disappeared so that I shouldn't even know where he was. And as I said before, I was very sleepy that night. And there wasn't supposed to be any sleeping on that job, not just because of your work, but because it was dangerous letting things look after themselves for long. Well, the long and short of it is, I sat down in a corner—not intending to stop there more than a minute or two—and I went off to sleep. Now it's a hell of a muddle after that, but I'll try and get it straight."

"And high time you did, Charlie," said his uncle, "if you ask me."

"What woke me up was a noise and a smell of burning. Now at my end of the works we had this big tank of Coaleen, which is what we were making there—a liquid fuel out of coal. And it's worse than petrol. A few sparks in that tank and it 'ud all go up in the air. Or even if a fire got near it and warmed everything up, that stuff would explode. I

knew something must have got on fire, and I chased down the passage. It was thick with smoke, and, mind you, it was never very light at the best of times. Now somebody brushed past me in that smoky passage."

"This chap—what's it—Kibworth?"

"It must have been. Down at the end there was a lot of match-boarding, and the electric wiring ran along there. Yes, and I remember now—this Kibworth, who'd been an electrical engineer, said that wiring didn't look too good. There must have been a short or something that had set the match-boarding on fire. When I got there—mind you, uncle, you must understand I'd just wakened up and it was all thick with smoke—somebody'd been using an axe on that match-boarding on the side where the big tank was. The axe was there, and I picked it up. Some of the woodwork was still smouldering. I shouted and shouted. And I burnt my arm, too. But—this is the point—the real job had been done before I got on the scene, and the only chap that could have done it was this Kibworth. I can see now what happened. He'd done what he could—saved the works, I expect, and maybe the whole town—and then knowing that everybody would be coming, he'd got out so as not to be found there, because the police were after him and he'd no right to be there, and they might have said he'd started the fire instead of putting it out. I'm telling you what I think now, not what I thought then. I'd only one thought in my head then—and that was, I didn't want 'em to know I'd been asleep. You see, there was no talk about heroes then. And I knew that if I owned up to being

asleep I'd be kicked out in two minutes, and I wanted to keep the job."

"And I don't blame you for that, lad," said his uncle, with feeling. "My God I don't."

"What I think Kibworth did," Charlie continued, his face glistening with sweat, "was to run out and then ring that fire alarm just outside the works, because the fire brigade was round in no time and they never knew who'd sent for it first. Kibworth had done his share then and wasn't going to hang about lest he should be copped. Now all I cared about was not letting on I'd been asleep. The foreman and the other chap found me there with an axe in one hand and the other arm a bit burnt. I was all queer with the smoke and what not. They thought I'd done it all, and told a newspaper chap so. Mind you, uncle, there was none of this hero stuff then. I didn't claim to be a hero, never have done. But I wasn't going to get sacked if I could help it. That's all I cared about. Then Mr. Kinney came—"

"Who's Mr. Kinney when he's at home?"

"He's a famous chap on the *Daily Tribune* and the *Sunday Courier*. Writes special articles and all that. And he said right off that I was a hero who'd saved the works and perhaps the whole town—risked a terrible death and all that—"

"I suppose in a way you had, hadn't you, Charlie? After all, you did go to where the fire was, near this big tank you talk about."

"Yes, that's right. But I'd done nothing really. But he wouldn't have it. I was the great hero, and Mr. Kinney was going to tell everybody so, and when our manager tried to stop him he told him to go to

hell. And by this time I'd let myself in for it. There wasn't any going back. That's how it all started. I didn't ask Mr. Kinney to make his fuss. But I couldn't back out of it then."

"That's so," said his uncle, frowning. "And then you got five hundred pounds for something you hadn't done."

"In a way I did," Charlie confessed. But then he added, rather shrewdly: "But at the same time, if you ask me, I got that five hundred pounds not because of any fire in Utterton, but because I let 'em take me to London and show me like a prize bull, to boost the paper. They had that five hundred pounds business on the films, showed me getting it."

"Advertisement sort o' thing, eh?"

"That London trip was nothing but that all the time."

"Ay, I can follow that," said his uncle slowly, "but fact remains that this other chap did the trick and you didn't, and you got the credit and he didn't."

"And now they've collared him," cried Charlie excitedly. "That's the point, uncle."

"That means there's only one thing for you to do, lad. You see that for yourself, don't you?"

"You mean, to go to London—?"

"To go to London and go to this paper—or papers, for I don't know how many's in it—and tell 'em straight you didn't do it, and this other chap did, and if they can make such a palaver about you, then they make another palaver about him."

"He'll need it, too, now the police have got him. Damn it, it's not right."

"It's not right, Charlie, and you've got to put it

right—quick as you can. And you've got to go and see this chap Kibworth and tell him what's happened. I don't say all that money's rightly his—from what you've told me—but some of it is; and I don't know that we ought to be taking any either—”

“Why not? Some of that five hundred belongs to me. I'll bet Kibworth would admit that, right off. Didn't I have to do everything they told me to do in London?”

“Well, you must settle that between you, lad. But these papers that made a fuss over you can make a fuss over him now, seeing that he really did it. And you've got to tell 'em so, lad. Let 'em hero him out o' prison. If you deserved it, then so does he.”

“I'll go back to-morrow, uncle.”

“Better late nor never, lad. And you'll feel better when you've done what's right. I've fancied once or twice you'd got something on your mind. What about your job in Utterton?”

Charlie laughed, though not very heartily. “Oh—that's gone.”

“Didn't matter when you found yourself a hero in all the papers, eh? And now you'll neither be a hero nor have a job.”

“That's about it.”

“Well, you'll be an honest man, and that's something, Charlie. To hear some people talk, you'd think honesty's as common as muck, but it isn't. Three out of every five is ready to do a bit o' twisting. And you'll go to-morrow, eh?”

“I'll go back first thing to-morrow, uncle, and put it right. They're not going to hero me any more when the real chap's in prison. They can have

another 'story'—as they call it—and make the most of that." He laughed. "You know, I feel better for all this coming out. Come on, uncle, what with Aunt Nellie gone and Madge carrying on, you want cheering up, so let's go out somewhere. It may be a long time before I see Slakeby again."

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### LONDON AGAIN

#### 1

WHEN Charlie arrived in London again, he found himself thinking not about Kibworth or Kinney, but about that girl, Ida Chatwick; which, as he knew, was silly, just a waste of time. But there it was. He said to himself, "This is where Ida Chatwick is," and the remark seemed to illuminate the gloomy immensities of King's Cross Station. There was no New Cecil Hotel nonsense this time. He had to find his own place, and it had to be cheap, too. But he was not above asking advice, and he got it from a porter, who suggested that he should try Boomerang House, only five minutes' walk from the station.

Boomerang House was a tall, narrow, squeezed-in sort of place, very dark inside and smelling like a damp woollen sock. It offered Charlie bed and breakfast at five shillings per night or thirty shillings per week, and Charlie very artfully, as he thought, managed to leave it an open question whether he was going to pay them several five shillings or pay thirty at the end of the week. The manageress was very odd: she wore eyeglasses and spoke in a very mincing manner, but reeked of whisky and had a long red nose and a moist eye. From first to last she called Charlie Mr. 'Ibble.

"And I'm shaw, Mr. 'Ibble, you'll faind the room very comfortable. The same gentlemen come and stay with us yare after yare." She produced a lady-like little laugh that unfortunately was like a blast from a distillery. "That's why we call it Bewmerang House."

Charlie was puzzled. "Well, why do you?"

"Because everybody comes back. Like a bewmerang, you see, Mr. 'Ibble. You know—a bewmerang."

"I've got it, I've got it," cried Charlie, who thought it was pretty good, much better than the hotel itself.

The manageress now looked grave and laid a hand on his arm. "There's just one thing, Mr. 'Ibble. Your neighbour on this floor's practically one of our permanents—Mrs. Barragada. Yes, Mrs. Barragada. The neem is foreign, of course. She married a South American gentleman—oh—very, very rich, I believe, Mr. 'Ibble, he was—very, very, very rich indeed. But poor Mrs. Barragada's had a lot of treble."

"Treble?"

"Yes, a lot of treble. We've all had our trebles, haven't we, Mr. 'Ibble? But poor Mrs. Barragada's had more than her share, and—between you and I, Mr. 'Ibble, just between you and I—she's not—well, she's not—"

"Not all there," Charlie suggested, not very cheerfully. He did not want a neighbour who was not all there.

"On one or two points only. She believes that her daughter—her daughter Lera—is an opera singer and is about to sing at Covent Garden."

"And isn't she?"

"So far as we can ascertain, Mr. 'Ibble, her daughter Lera is married to the manager of a six-penny bazaar in either Liverpool or Glesgow—we think Glesgow. But it's no use talking to poor Mrs. Barragada on these points, Mr. 'Ibble. Her trebles have been too much for her—just on these points. In other things—a most interesting lady indeed."

"And if she starts talking about her daughter, she's got to be humoured, has she?" said Charlie, who did not like the sound of this at all.

"Exactly," cried the manageress. "And there's just another thing. Bewmerang House is, as you are probably aware of, a temperance hotel. But we can get it in for you, Mr. 'Ibble, we can get it in. Just say the word, and we can get it in. Matter of fact, one of our permanent's is in the Wain and Spirits, and we can get it in through him on very good terms. Just say the word, Mr. 'Ibble."

Charlie replied rather vaguely that he would. At the moment it seemed to him that the manageress had got enough in herself to do for the whole hotel. Then he remembered something. Perhaps this woman could tell him. "I wonder if you could tell me something," he began, after some hesitation.

"If there's aanything," she assured him.

"Well, you see," Charlie explained, "I've come up here to see a chap I know, and I've just read in the paper that he was up yesterday at a police court and remanded in custody—as they call it. And I'm wondering now where he is and if I could see him."

"No idea at all, I'm shaw," said the manageress, with dignity and growing reserve. "My duties here

at Bewmerang House have not brought me into contact with police courts. We've never, never had treble here with the police—never, never, I'm glad to say."

"All right. But you needn't worry. This chap's not a crook or anything and neither am I. It's only something to do with politics."

"Even so," said the manageress, thawing a little, "I can't help you, Mr. 'ibble. But one of our permanent's—Mr. Smith—is something in the legal way, and you might mention it to him."

"Is he in now?"

"Mr. Smith is not in now, and I cannot say when he will be in, Mr. 'ibble. Mr. Smith is out a good deal. But you might see him at breakfast to-morrow, though I can't premise, I really can't premise. Ainything further, Mr. 'ibble, kaindly ring for the girl."

And off she went, leaving Charlie feeling that his question about the police court had not improved his standing at Boomerang House. As he unpacked his clothes, he wondered what he should do next. There was Kibworth to be seen, and the *Daily Tribune* to be attended to. A little paragraph in one of the papers he had read in the train had told him that Kibworth had appeared yesterday at Norfolk Street police court, but Charlie knew as little about police courts, especially Metropolitan police courts, as the manageress herself, and could not imagine how you set about seeing a man who had just been "remanded in custody." Was Kibworth still at Norfolk Street, wherever that was, or had he been taken somewhere else? Could he leave

all that, for the time being, and tackle the *Daily Tribune*? Unfortunately, he would keep on thinking quite uselessly about that girl. He felt immensely alone now that he was back in London as a real person, and not as somebody invented by the *Daily Tribune*. Boomerang House did nothing to cheer him up. He heard vague sounds from the next room. Was that Mrs. Barragada, who had had all that trouble and now was as good as off her head? Charlie had a horror of people who were really queer, always had had, and so was not comforted by those little noises from the room next door.

When he was ready to go out, for he had no intention of spending the rest of the evening in Boomerang House, he crept to the door, opened it gently and peered out. Nobody about. He shut the door behind him. Immediately the door next to his was flung open and a little untidy woman rushed out and stood directly in his way. "Now do you think you could lend me a match?" she cried gaily, jangling a lot of bracelets and beads. "Do you think you could?"

She held out an empty match-box. When Charlie produced some matches, she took several of them and put them into her own box. "Five," she counted. "Two more for luck, eh? Just two more. There—seven. I'm Mrs. Barragada. What's your name?"

Charlie told her. She was a very brown and wrinkled little woman, quite old, and her eyes, which were never still for a second, were an odd light colour, so that they seemed to glitter.

"And we're neighbours," she cried, gayer than

ever. "Isn't that splendid? Isn't it?" She came closer, looking up at him. "Are you musical? Are you?"

"Oh—I don't know," said Charlie off-handedly. "I like a good tune." But he did not like the turn the conversation was taking.

Mrs. Barragada now gave him a sharp tug, which landed him in the doorway of her room. She darted inside, to return holding up a rather dim photograph of a young woman. "My daughter Laura," she cried. "You recognise her? Do you? The most beautiful voice ever known in the Argentine, and now she's going to sing at Covent Garden."

"Is that so?" said Charlie, doing his best with the situation.

"At Covent Garden, the week after next. Three special performances. And I can't go. Her own mother can't go. Do you know why? Do you?" Her little brown face lost all its gaiety: she looked like a forlorn monkey. "Laura won't let me. If I'm there, she can't sing. She can sing for everybody—oh, so beautifully—but not for me—her own mother."

"I'm sorry about that. It's a shame," said Charlie awkwardly.

"Isn't it? Isn't it a shame? I can't hear her now, never, never. And her own mother." She began crying. "Don't look, don't look," she said reproachfully through her tears, and then, quite angrily, "Go away." Charlie instinctively stepped back and at once she banged the door in his face.

Well, that was Mrs. Barragada. He hurried down the stairs, feeling rather frightened and miserable.

For two pins he'd pack up and find a place a bit more cheerful than this Boomerang House. "Oh, well," he told himself, "I'm here and I might as well stick it." But he saw himself returning later that night and creeping along the landing to his room, terrified that Mrs. Barragada, now in her night-dress and madder than ever, might dart out and catch him again.

He wandered into the lighted tumult of London, which seemed like a vast fair-ground after Slakeby. As he went, he felt small, uncertain, lost. He was still determined to do what he had promised both his uncle and himself to do, but the confidence he had felt at Slakeby was gone now. When he had come to London a fortnight ago, he had been sustained by the almost magical power of the *Daily Tribune*, which merely said the word and then doors opened for him. The thought of this only made him feel more insecure now that he had returned as somebody very real, but not at all important, a chap who—and this was alarming—hadn't even a job and didn't even live anywhere. He had something to eat at a tea-shop, and noticed gloomily that nearly all the other people there were either in married or courting couples or looked as if they had only just time to bolt their food before they rushed off to do something definite and serious. After that he had a penny bus ride that landed him near the New Cecil Hotel. He went to have a look at its grand illuminated entrance, wondered if Ida Chatwick were still there, longed to have a word again with that carroty chambermaid, but dared not ask for one or the other, and walked slowly away.

Finally he arrived in the neighbourhood of the *Daily Tribune* office, and decided that he might as well call there. He would try Hughson first.

This time, however, he was not free of the place. The chap in uniform in the little box downstairs made him fill up a form, giving his name and the nature of his business. Then there was a wait of ten minutes.

"Mr. 'Ughson's not in," the sergeant-major announced.

"Do they know when he will be in?" asked Charlie.

"No, they don't." And the great man turned away.

Charlie didn't feel equal to trying anybody else, not that night. To-morrow, he decided, he would make a great effort to see Kibworth, and then after that he would really tackle the *Daily Tribune*. So he returned, low in spirits, to Boomerang House, which looked even more cheerless at this hour than it had done before. On the first floor, somebody who had evidently "got it in," was entertaining a friend or two and making a great deal of noise about it. Further up it was dim and silent. There was no sign of Mrs. Barragada. Charlie reached his room safely, went straight to bed, and then spent the next hour and a half turning and tossing and thinking confused thoughts about Ida Chatwick and Kibworth and Mr. Kinney.

legal gentleman, and so was down early in the dining-room, determined not to miss Mr. Smith. After half an hour, during which he had time to eat his own breakfast and almost forget he had eaten it, he learned from the waitress that Mr. Smith would not be down to breakfast. Mr. Smith must be sought in his own room, Number 6.

"Excuse me," said Charlie.

Mr. Smith, still in bed after a late night, was not pleasing to look at. His face was as creased as the bedclothes. His eyes were bloodshot. His voice was hoarse. "Had a thick night last night," he explained, with a certain gloomy pride. "Mixed 'em a bit. Always a mistake—mixing 'em."

"That's right," said Charlie affably.

"By the way, what do you want?" Mr. Smith asked this question quite good-naturedly.

"It's like this," Charlie began, and explained briefly.

Mr. Smith groaned. "You oughtn't to talk to me about police courts so early in the morning when I've got such a head and mouth on me. It's cruel. But you've come to the right shop. I can tell you where your pal is. Remanded in custody, day before yesterday, at Norfolk Street—that it? Well, he's in the Remand Prison at Brixton now. Yes, you can see him all right. Not like an ordinary prison, you see. They're on remand there, not sentenced."

"Can I just go and ask for him then?"

"Long as you go at the right time. I forget what it is exactly—ten to twelve, two to four—something like that. Haven't been there just lately myself,

though my boss does police court work. What's your pal charged with?"

"Don't know exactly," Charlie confessed. "But I fancy they've been after him some time—he's a communist."

"Oh—one of the Reds, is he? They'll get him as a suspected person or conduct likely to lead to a breach of the peace—that sort of thing. But they'll get him all right. Serve him right, too. This isn't Russia."

Charlie admitted that it wasn't.

"Well, then, there you are. It isn't Russia, and we don't want it to be. This is a free country."

"Not for this chap, it isn't, is it?" Charlie retorted.

"Ah well, he shouldn't be a communist. Anyhow, that's where you'll find him, and just take care they don't come after you. They may be on the look-out for his pals."

"I'll have to chance that," said Charlie. "Thanks very much."

"No trouble," said Mr. Smith politely. "Just pass that tin of salts and that water-jug before you go will you? I ate a lot of cucumber last night, I remember. The minute I start mixing 'em, I must go and eat a lot of something. Staying here long? If you are, don't leave any whisky in the old girl's charge. She takes half and then waters the rest. Ta-ta."

Charlie went off without asking how to find this prison at Brixton. He did not even know where Brixton itself was. By the time he had found Brixton and the prison, and got permission to see Kibworth, most of the morning had gone. There

were still twenty minutes of the allotted morning time left, however, when he arrived in one of the little partitioned places in which you talked, through a wire grille, to the prisoners. He saw Kibworth approaching, his lean face alight with pleasure. But when he reached the wire and saw Charlie standing at the other side, his grin suddenly faded and a bewildered stare took its place.

"Here, this is wrong, isn't it?" he began.

"Don't you remember me, Kibworth?" cried Charlie.

And Kibworth did now. "Utterton, isn't it? My God—yes. Our hero from Utterton, eh? Habble, that's it? What a night that was, what a night!"

"Listen, Kibworth, you put that fire out, didn't you?"

"Near enough, comrade. Then I ran. Had to, if I didn't want to be discovered. If they'd caught me, they'd have told me I started it. Didn't I tell you that wiring was rotten, chum? You had a short, that's what happened. I cut some of that match-boarding away, then cleared out, but rang the fire alarm outside."

"I didn't want to take the credit, y'know, Kibworth," said Charlie, and he explained what happened.

"Forget it, chum, forget it," cried Kibworth, grinning.

"Forget nothing! Listen to me. I'm going to make the *Tribune* tell everybody that you did it, and not me."

"You are, are you?"

"Yes, I am."

"And what a hope you've got, comrade! Not a chance."

"You'll see."

"I can tell you what I'll see, and that's a couple of months in Pentonville."

"Not if the *Tribune*—"

Kibworth shook his head. "Wouldn't touch me with a barge-pole. Bolshie agitator, that's me. No, this time I get a couple of months. Don't worry, I've got a good chap defending me—one of the party—but he can't get me off, and he knows it. That's all right. All for the good of the cause. I know what I'm doing, comrade. I want to have a good look at Pentonville—might come in useful soon."

"You'll not see Pentonville if I can help it, Kibworth."

"No doubt. But you can't help it."

"And then there's this money," Charlie continued, and told him about the five hundred pounds.

"And you think I ought to have some of that, do you, comrade?"

"Yes, you're entitled to it."

The old wolfish look took possession of Kibworth's lean face. "They didn't give you that because you'd done anything useful, and if it had been me they'd have not given me a penny. They gave it as part of their damned stunt, comrade. They turned you into a show, that's all. And I don't want their money. I hate their guts, the swine. I'd like to choke Hatchland with his dirty papers, make him eat a whole bloody edition—that's what I'd like to do, chum."

"I dare say," said Charlie mildly, "but it seems to me that some o' this money belongs to you."

"Couldn't take it. If the party knew I'd taken money from Hatchland and his papers—"

"But you're not. You're taking it from me, and that's quite different. You're not going to tell me you couldn't do with it—you or somebody belonging to you."

Kibworth thought for a moment. "Listen, chum," he began softly. "If they do give me a month or two, there's somebody going to suffer for it. She's not my wife, according to this boss law we've still got here, but she's as good as my wife, and if I'm out of it for two months it's not going to be easy for her, with a kid of mine to keep as well. I won't take anything for myself, but she can have it if she wants it. Don't tell her where it comes from, just say you owe me it, d'you see, chum? If you can make it about four quid a week all the time I'm in prison, she'll be in clover. Will that satisfy you? All right. I'll tell you her name and address." He repeated these twice, and Charlie wrote them down on the back of an envelope. "She'll be coming this afternoon or tomorrow," Kibworth continued, "and I'll tell her she might get some money from you."

"But mind you," said Charlie sternly, "that's not all. I was wrong to take the credit, but Mr. Kinney and the *Daily Tribune* really started it and they can put it right. If I'm a hero, then so are you. I'll tell them something."

"No doubt you will, comrade," said Kibworth, grinning sardonically, "no doubt you will. Ever seen that inventor since—what was his name? You

remember? He showed us those models. Otley—Finnigan Otley, that was his name. Ever seen him since?"

"No, I've not. You might say he started all this, because he gave me that whisky, and it was chiefly the whisky that made me feel so sleepy that night."

"You can't say who and what started it," Kibworth declared emphatically. "There was Otley's whisky, that bad wiring, me and the C.I.D. man who was after me, this Kinney, the *Daily Tribune*—they all started it."

"And some of 'em's going to finish it now," Charlie announced.

"Well, I'll have to go back, chum. Thanks for coming. You've got that name and address all safe?" And Kibworth gave him a last grin. Charlie watched him leave the wire grille, saw him speak to the warder, and then waited until both Kibworth and the warder disappeared from sight. It had not been pleasant seeing Kibworth there, but now that it was all over, Charlie felt better than he had done for some time. He was now his usual honest self. No more awkward thoughts popping up at the back of his mind. All was straightforward. He had to make the *Daily Tribune* do its share now, that was all. He came out of the prison, into a cleaner and gayer Brixton than he had noticed before, and took his seat on the bus with the air of a man about to capture a city.

## 3

It was the same sergeant-major in the little glass cage.

"Can I see Mr. Shuckleworth?"

"Have you got an appointment?"

"No," replied Charlie.

The sergeant-major very slowly shook his head. Then he kept his head still in order to cast upon Charlie a look of profound pity. "You've no chance of seeing him then. Mr. Shuckleworth's the editor. Very busy."

"I know, I know," said Charlie, who wasn't going to stand any nonsense from these military old frauds. "I know him. Habble's my name—Charlie Habble. Don't you remember there was a lot about me in the paper week before last?"

"Fill in this form then."

You had to give your name and the person you wanted to see and the nature of your business. Charlie's business was "Urgent" in large if shaky capitals. The sergeant-major gave the form to a page-boy, who, after kicking another page-boy on the shin, and then producing a triumphant shrill whistle, departed with it to the upper regions. It was early evening, and the *Daily Tribune* was waking up. Dozens of people were going in and out, with a word to the sergeant-major, who nearly always either gave them something, letters or papers, or received something from them. None of these people took the least notice of Charlie, who might, he reflected, have simply been

one of its one and a half million readers. Nobody stared and stopped and said "Here's our Wonder Hero." His photograph had appeared prominently in the paper for several mornings in succession, only a fortnight before, but not one of them here seemed to recognise him. He came to the conclusion that they were all too busy, too much on the run. They all had something very important to do, no doubt. But then he himself had been very important only the week before last. It was rather queer.

He and the page-boy went up in the lift to the third floor, where he was shown into an empty waiting-room. The young man who appeared there was strange to Charlie. He announced himself as Mr. Shuckleworth's secretary, and had protruding teeth and a supercilious stare. Charlie took a dislike to him at once.

"Mr. Shuckleworth's very busy, you know. What is it you want?"

"It's very important," said Charlie.

The secretary smiled pityingly. "Possibly, but—"

Charlie raised his voice. "It's very important."

"But people come here all day and night, thinking they have important business to discuss. If Mr. Shuckleworth saw them all—well, I ask you—"

"Don't ask me," said Charlie forcibly. "I don't care how many people come here. This is different, and you know damned well it is. You didn't bring all them to London and call 'em heroes and God knows what, did you?"

"Possibly not, but Mr. Shuckleworth doesn't understand what urgent business you can have to discuss with him."

"Well, how can he understand if he's there and I'm here?" Charlie retorted. "He'll understand soon enough when he sees me, won't he? If it wasn't urgent, I wouldn't be here. Tell him that."

The secretary, clearly one who was born to obey and not to command, hesitated a moment, then went out, and after a few minutes returned to conduct Charlie into the editor's own room. There was a frown on Mr. Shuckleworth's large, flat face. Obviously he was not at all pleased to see Charlie.

"I can't imagine what this urgent business of yours is, Habble," he began. "But you ought to realise that, first, I'm a very busy man, and that, secondly, the *Daily Tribune* has done a great deal for you and can't be expected to do any more."

"Now listen, Mr. Shuckleworth," said Charlie earnestly. "I've got a real story for you."

"We're the best judges of that, you know."

"Just listen a minute, that's all. You boosted me for doing something I really didn't do at all. I may have done a bit of it, finished it off, but the real job of putting that fire out was done by somebody else. And this chap's in prison—or remanded in custody, or whatever they call it. He's a communist. And he's the real hero—if there's got to be a hero."

A telephone buzzed. Mr. Shuckleworth's desk seemed to be crowded with telephones. He barked into one of them, then looked hard at Charlie. "There hasn't got to be a hero. The thing's over and done with now. Don't you realise that? We've other things to think and write about here besides fires in where-is-it—Utterton."

"I never said you hadn't, Mr. Shuckleworth. But

you'd other things to think and write about a fortnight since, too. The point is, here's this chap who really did it—”

Mr. Shuckleworth looked annoyed. “Don't try and take that tone with me, Habble. I won't have it. Doesn't it occur to you that the less you say about this business the better? You allowed us to assume that you had done this, you took the credit, you took the cheque we offered you, and now you come along with some vague story about some communist friend of yours. You don't seem to realise that you're putting yourself in a very dangerous position.”

“I can understand that,” said Charlie, “but you see—”

Mr. Shuckleworth waved an impatient hand. “No, it won't do. Perhaps we were in rather too much of a hurry. I had my doubts about it all at the time. The less said now the better, particularly from your point of view. Fortunately for you, the story's quite dead. Don't try and resurrect it. No, I don't want to hear any more. I'm busy.”

“Nay, but damn it!” cried Charlie. “Fair's fair, and—”

Telephones began buzzing all over the desk. Mr. Shuckleworth glared at them and then glared at Charlie, waving him out. There was nothing for it but to go, for Mr. Shuckleworth was now attending to the telephones, and he gave no sign of having any wish to exchange another word with his visitor. Charlie had to retreat, bewildered and baffled.

Outside in the corridor he met a brisk young woman and stopped her. “Could you tell me if Mr. Hughson's here, please?”

"Mr. Hughson? I'll see."

After a minute or two, she returned to say that Mr. Hughson was out on a story somewhere. So that was no good. "What about Mr. Kinney?" he asked.

She smiled. "Mr. Kinney won't be in to-night. He doesn't often come to the office at this time. You'll probably find him at home."

"And where's that?"

She gave him the address of Kinney's flat. He would go there then, he told himself: Mr. Kinney started it all, so Mr. Kinney could put it right. He had always had more confidence in the power and personality of Mr. Kinney than he had in the power and personality of Mr. Shuckleworth. Besides, he knew Mr. Kinney better.

## 4

Mr. Kinney's flat was on the fourth floor of a great block of flats, into which Charlie ventured cautiously and somewhat wearily. A funny thing happened when he got to the actual door. It opened at the very moment when he was putting out his hand to ring the bell. A stout woman with a red face, breathless and angry, faced him in the doorway.

"Mr. Kinney live here, please?"

"Think he does!" cried the woman. "Listen and you'll hear him—hear the pair of 'em." She paused, and Charlie could catch the sound of raised, angry voices coming from somewhere inside. "Goings on! Sick and tired of it, I am. What with one and another! If they want any dinner, they can cook it

themselves; they'll get no dinner out of me." And she came outside, leaving the door wide open behind her.

"I want to see him," said Charlie.

"Well, go in and see him then. Nobody's stopping you. I don't want to see him. I've seen enough of both of 'em, thank you. Go in and knock a bit of sense into their heads, if you can. Only don't ask me to go and tell 'em you're here, whoever you are, 'cos I'm not going. Marching orders, that's me," she concluded triumphantly, "marching orders." And off she stumped down the corridor. The door remained wide open; the voices inside were louder than ever. Charlie rang the bell twice, but nobody came and the voices went on and on. Finally remembering Kibworth and everything, he made no more bones about it, but boldly entered the flat and made for the door through which the voices were coming. He knocked hard on it. It was Mr. Kinney himself who opened it, Mr. Kinney, very untidy, furious, and drunk. Charlie walked in. At the other side of the room, not untidy and not drunk, but equally angry, was a dark young woman, her lips compressed into a thin, murderous line.

"My God!" roared Mr. Kinney, "and here's another of 'em. What! It's—what's-your-name, isn't it?—Habble—that's it. Here, are you another of 'em, Habble?"

"No, I'm not another of 'em, Mr. Kinney," Charlie replied calmly. He did not know what he was supposed to be, but he was sure that whatever they were, he was not another of them.

"Oh—don't be a fool," said the woman to Kinney.  
"Who is this?"

"I expect you ought to know," Mr. Kinney shouted at her. "Habble's a hero. Have you had any heroes?"

"I didn't marry one," she retorted.

"No, but you ought to have done—you ought to have done."

The woman gave him one look, walked past him, said "Excuse me" to Charlie, who was still standing near the door, and then walked out, banging the door. Mr. Kinney, muttering hard, poured himself out a drink and swallowed it in one gulp. Then he looked mistily at Charlie.

"What d'you come here for, Habble? Honest, now. Come to see me or come to see her?"

"I came to see you, Mr. Kinney. I don't even know who she is."

"That's soon answered—who she is. She's my wife—and everybody else's tart—"

"Here, steady on, Mr. Kinney," said Charlie, startled by such language.

"What I'm saying I'm *saying*—and I don't give a damn who hears me. Sit down, Habble. And have a drink. You've got to sit down and have a drink." He fussed about with chairs and drinks for a minute, at the end of which, when Charlie was seated with a whisky in front of him, they heard the outer door give a bang. Clearly, Mrs. Kinney had now gone.

"What was that?" asked Kinney drunkenly.

Charlie told him,

"Let her go, let her go," he muttered, his head sinking. Then he jerked himself up, and shouted:

"Let her go. I don't care. You hear that, Habble? I don't care. The whole Grenadier Guards can have her now, if they want to, for all I care."

"Just a minute, Mr. Kinney," said Charlie earnestly. He wanted to change the subject as soon as possible, for he was really shocked. Even if they had a grand big luxurious room like this, husbands and wives, he realised, had to quarrel sometimes, but the brutality of Kinney's remarks about his wife was peculiarly shocking to Charlie in such surroundings. He assumed that it was because Kinney was so drunk that he could bring himself to say such things, which went beyond anything he had ever heard from drunken husbands in Utterton or Bendworth. "I've come to see you about something very important. Just listen a minute to what I've got to say."

"You've got to listen to me first, Habble. You married?"

"No," replied Charlie. He thought for a fraction of a moment about Ida Chatwick, and it was this that led him to add: "And not likely to be."

"Then you're a sensible fellow. I was a sensible fellow till I married. I was a happy fellow, too." Kinney gave a foolish laugh. "Thought I knew something, but I knew nothing, nothing." He pointed at the door. "Hatchland had her first, then he passed her on to some of his friends. I knew she'd been with Hatchland. It came to me in a—in a flash—the other week. Intuition that was—I've always had it. I looked at my respected employer, Sir George Hatchland, and I said to myself, quite suddenly, I said to myself: 'My God, you've

been with my wife.' And I was right. He was the first of 'em, but not the last. They've all been laughing like hell at me. Silly old Kinney, that's it. Expect everybody knows. How did you come to hear of it?" And he looked at Charlie quite suspiciously.

"Me! I didn't know anything about it," cried Charlie indignantly. "You've just told me. I came to see you about something else. If you'll only let me explain."

Kinney looked offended. "Why shouldn't you explain? I'm not stopping you. What's it you want?"

Charlie began telling his story again, but Kinney did not let him get very far.

"Wait a minute, wait a minute, Habble," he cried, waving a fat wet hand. "You realise who you're talking to now? You're talking to the man who made you, and the *one man*, the *one man*, in Bri'ish journalism to-day who could have done it. When I heard what you'd done, I said to myself, 'I'll make a public hero out of him, that's what I'll do. Everybody shall know about George Habble—'"

"Charlie Habble."

"Charlie Habble—sorry! That's what I said to myself, and I did it, didn't I? Didn't I do it? You know I did, and so does everybody else. The one man who could do it—Hal Kinney. So what you grumbling at?"

"But I'm telling you that I didn't really do anything much that night," Charlie protested. "The fellow who did do it is in prison."

"What for?" demanded Kinney sternly. "No right to put him in prison."

"Because he's a communist, that's why "

"Communist! That's bad, Habble. Can't have communism, y'know. Always been against it myself. Written some very powerful articles against it. Materialistic, that's what it is. No religion. No family life."

"Never mind about that, Mr. Kinney. The point is—if there is to be a hero in that business, he was the hero, not me."

"Oh! Who says so?"

"Well," said Charlie, rather bewildered, "I say so."

"But it's not what *you* say, Habble, it's what *I* say. That's what I keep telling you. You didn't make yourself into one—not really—I made you into a hero."

"All right then, make this other chap into a hero. He deserves it."

"Perhaps he does, perhaps he doesn't. I dunno. Doesn't sound as if he does, if he's a Bolshie. Can't start making Bolshies into heroes—or where are we? Besides, it's the *Tribune's* story—or it was, because it's dead now—and I've finished with the *Tribune*. And the *Sunday Courier*."

"Oh—you're leaving, are you?"

Kinney rose, with some difficulty, and tried to assume a posture of oratorical dignity. "Sir Gregory Hatchland has betrayed my trust as a man," he announced, grandly, if thickly, "and so I can no longer respect him as an employer. There are other papers besides the *Daily Tribune* and the *Sunday Courier*, and they'll be glad to welcome Hal Kinney. Hatchland's had his laugh. I'll have mine now. He

doesn't now I know. I shan't tell him. I'll simply resign. But I'll show you what I think about him. You see that clock?" He indicated a rather large and very ornamental clock on a side-table.

"This clock," he continued, lurching towards it, "was given to me as a wedding present, by my kind and thoughtful employer, Sir Gregory Hatchland. Now watch this."

"Here, steady on," cried Charlie, for Kinney had now perilously swooped down to the fender and had risen from it waving a poker.

"With best wishes from Sir Gregory," said Kinney, as he stood swaying in front of the clock. "Best wishes for what? — you bloody lecherous old monkey!"

Charlie jumped forward, but he was just too late to prevent Kinney from aiming a tremendous wild blow at the clock. The swing of it was so terrific that it carried not only the poker but Kinney himself at the clock and the little table, and the whole lot of them went over, with a great splintering of glass and woodwork. By the time Charlie had pulled him up, Kinney was a dreadful sight, for he had cut his face, which was covered with blood, and had been sick on the floor. There was nobody else in the flat but Charlie, who was left with the job of taking the big fellow, now dazed and groaning, into the bathroom to clean him up a bit, and then of undressing him and putting him to bed. Charlie had had to deal before with drunks who had hurt themselves, but never with anybody who was as heavy and helpless as Kinney was. It was a long job. Fortunately, the cuts were superficial and there was no need to

call a doctor. Indeed, by the time Charlie had washed his own hands and face and had tidied himself up, Kinney was fast asleep.

"Well," said Charlie to himself ruefully, as he closed the door of the flat behind him, "I don't seem to be getting on very fast with this business." It began to look as if Kibworth had been right after all. Tired out now, he decided to have something to eat at the first reasonable place he found and then go straight back to Boomerang House, Mrs. Barragada or no Mrs. Barragada, and to bed.

## 5

In the morning, he felt rather more hopeful. He had not seen Hughson yet, and though Hughson might not be as important as Shuckleworth or Kinney, at least he was friendly and would listen properly to what Charlie had to say and probably give him some sensible advice. The problem was then how to find Hughson. This meant going once again to the *Daily Tribune* office, which Charlie did very reluctantly, for he was tired of the *Daily Tribune* office. This time, however, another sergeant-major was on duty in the little glass cage, and after dodging about until a quiet spell arrived, Charlie was able to approach this functionary as man to man. He learned then that Hughson, in common with other journalists, made a habit of visiting the private bar of a local pub, the "Old Magpie," between twelve and one. If he was in the neighbourhood and at liberty, Hughson might be

found in the "Old Magpie." So Charlie went for a walk round until quarter past twelve, when he visited the "Old Magpie," a dingy pub tucked away in a side street. There, in the private bar, he found Hughson, one of a little group of talkative young men.

Charlie touched him on the elbow. "You remember me?"

"Hello! Of course I do," cried Hughson, his brown face wrinkling in a smile. "Our late hero. Have a drink."

Charlie had a bitter, and at the same time managed to detach Hughson from the others. They went into a quiet corner.

"Well, what's brought you back here?"

"Listen, Mr. Hughson," Charlie began earnestly. "And when I say 'listen,' I mean really do listen—for God's sake, listen."

"I'm not good at it, Habble, but I'll try hard. What's the matter? Not money, I hope, because I haven't a bean."

"No, it's not money. It's about this hero business. You see, I really didn't do anything, and another fellow did." Once again he embarked on the story of that night, of Kibworth and himself. "I tried to tell Mr. Shuckleworth," he concluded, "but he wouldn't listen properly and got mad. I tried to tell Mr. Kinney, but he was too drunk and anyhow didn't seem to care. Now I'm telling you, and I want to know if you can't do anything."

"Not a thing, my dear chap," cried Hughson. "You haven't a dog's chance. The story's dead."

"How d'you mean it's dead?"

"You and Utterton are clean out of the news. We don't care—and I'm talking now as the *Tribune*, not as a human being—whether it was you or anybody else who saved the town. Unless that somebody else, of course, happened to be in the news. You tell me that you didn't do it, but Greta Garbo did, and I'll promise you a couple of columns. In fact, I've sometimes thought we ought to arrange for the people who are in the news to do all the things that are in the news, so that you get Garbo flying to New Zealand and Helen Wills opening the Economic Conference. That would save a lot of time and space."

"But look here—and, if you don't mind, just stop being clever a minute—you go and make all this fuss about me, don't you? Now here's the other chap—Kibworth—"

"He's no good to us. Not simply because he happens to be a communist—though that reduces his chance to *nil*, anyhow—but really because, as I said before, the story's dead. And several more have died since. Your story's so dead that I feel queer talking to you—like sitting in a corner with a ghost."

"But damn it all," cried Charlie resentfully, "it's only a week or two—"

"I know, but that's a long time with a popular modern newspaper, my dear chap. We've got to keep changing the programme, you know. We're not a newspaper in the old-fashioned sense of the word. There are still one or two of them left, and they sell about one copy for every ten of ours. No, we're not really a newspaper, we're a circus in print, a vaudeville show, a Fun City, a daily comic. You

and Utterton have had your turn. We wouldn't care a damn now if somebody came up and proved there never had been a fire at your place or even that there wasn't such a town as Utterton."

"What about the other papers?"

"The only paper who'd print your Kibworth story would be the *Red Firebrand* or whatever the name of the communist rag is, and that wouldn't do him a bit of good. What might happen is that he'd be charged with being on the premises of your works, and then they'd tell him he probably set fire to the place himself. The best thing you can do is to be quiet. You're not in the news any more. All right—stay out of 'em."

"Well," and Charlie rubbed his forehead with his handkerchief, "this beats me."

"Just laugh at it, that's all."

"I'm not so sure it's any laughing matter," said Charlie heavily. "Makes me think a bit, this does."

"I hope you're not sorry you've stopped being England's young wonder hero."

"Course I'm not. Lot of silliness, all that. But it's a bit thick when they can't make too much of you one week and then a fortnight after, they don't even want to listen to you. Two weeks ago I was twice as large as life, according to the *Daily Tribune*, and now, according to them, I might as well be dead and buried. Talk about ups and downs! Kibworth was right. He told me I'd get nothing done. He knew more about papers than I did."

"He couldn't very well know less," said Hughson, grinning. "There's your old friend Gregory, of the

*Morning Pictorial.* Remember him? That girl, y'know."

Did he know! She was never out of his head these days more than half an hour together. And to see Mr. Gregory standing there was to be brought closer to her at once. Charlie was delighted.

"I'd like to have a word with him about her," he confessed to Hughson. "I've been wondering how she was getting on."

Hughson called Gregory over to them and made him have a drink. "You remember Habble?" he said. "Once our hero."

Charlie wasted no more time. "What's happened to that girl, Ida Chatwick, Mr. Gregory?" he enquired, with a little bumping of the heart.

"Oh—our Miss England," said Gregory casually. "Don't know what she's doing now. She had her film test, but I never heard how she went on. I'm up to the neck now organising our new Beauty Spot contest."

"Will she be still at the New Cecil Hotel?"

"Not likely. Unless somebody's keeping her there."

"Nobody'll be doing that," said Charlie sharply. "She wasn't that sort. Where did she have this test? What company was it?"

"What's this? Third Degree?"

"Come on, Greg," said Hughson, giving him a dig. "Play fair. Habble wants to know because he's fallen for her."

"Oh, that's it, is it? Well, the film company was the London and Imperial, and their studio's in Acton. You could go and ask them what she's doing,

but I can't think she's got a part or they'd have let us know, for publicity."

"And meanwhile," said Hughson, "you don't give a damn, being busy now with beauty spots instead of pretty wenches."

"Exactly. I don't know where the poor little devil is—back home, I hope. Sorry, Habble."

"You sound as if you'd got something to answer for in your time," said Charlie.

"I have," replied Gregory calmly. "When we've awarded a prize for this beauty spot, it'll probably look like a dustbin. That's how it goes on."

"Well, you won't have made a dustbin out o' that girl," said Charlie stoutly. "If that particular film company hasn't taken her on, I'll bet one of 'em has. Anyhow, I'm going to see, just to satisfy myself. Will you have another drink, you two?"

They would and did. Charlie held up his glass of beer and said emphatically: "Well, here's to fish and chip shops."

"Why?"

"Because they know what to do with newspapers."

"Greg, I believe he's trying to insult the Press."

"I think he is, Hughson. And after all, he's not done so badly out of one of them, has he?"

"A lot better than I deserve, I dare say," said Charlie. "But I wasn't just thinking about myself then, I was thinking about other people—and a lot of other people. Well, I won't bother you any more, Mr. Hughson. Thanks very much, both of you. Good morning."

He went out blinking into the sunlight that had found its way into that narrow street. Round the

corner were two lorries, unloading enormous rolls of paper into a basement, out of which there came the sound of machines, printing machines. Charlie stopped for a minute, and there we can leave him, staring at the doomed paper, listening to the muttering of the insatiable machines.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### NOT IN THE NEWS

#### 1

THE New Cecil Hotel again, and as close as ever. Charlie marched in boldly, never even glancing at the men in purple and silver uniforms, the waiters and page-boys. When he had been actually staying in the place, an honoured guest, he had been afraid of all these fellows. Now, when he had no right to be there at all and was merely seeking information, he did not care tuppence about them. This was not another instance of familiarity breeding contempt, for this change of attitude had occurred since he left the hotel. He was not the same young man: the Charlie Habble who had stood in awe of these pasty-faced lackeys no longer existed. This new one marched straight up to the central desk, where the glossy, varnished young man was still sitting.

"Is Miss Ida Chatwick still staying here?" Charlie asked.

"Miss Chatwick?"

"That's right. She was the girl who won that beauty competition."

The young man began turning over the pages of a book. "Miss Chatwick is no longer here, sir."

"When did she leave?"

"At the beginning of last week."

"I see." Charlie was not disappointed; he had expected this. He hesitated a moment. "When I was staying here," he continued, finally, "there was a what-do-you-call-it—you know—who came to clean up—"

"Chambermaid?"

"That's it. Chambermaid. This one had red hair. I can't tell you her name because I didn't know it. But I'd like to have a word with her."

"If you lost something when you were here, you can apply—"

"That's all right. I didn't lose anything, but I want a word with that girl. Don't worry, I'm not trying to do a bit of courting. Besides, she's engaged to a policeman."

The young man became faintly human. "Well, it's a little unusual, but I'll telephone through to the staff manageress."

It appeared that the red-haired chambermaid was actually engaged at that moment in turning out the very suite that Charlie had once occupied, and he was given permission to go up and see her there.

"Hello, are you coming in here again?" she cried, greatly surprised. She turned off her vacuum-cleaner.

"Not likely. I've done with these places."

"I should think you have!"

"Going back to where I came from as soon as I can," he went on, perching himself on the arm of the large chair. "But I asked to see you—"

"Oh—you asked to see me, did you? You be careful, or you'll be getting me a bad name in the place."

But she grinned, pushed the vacuum cleaner away, and settled down for a little chat.

"You see—it's about that girl, the one who got the beauty prize. You remember?"

The chambermaid's curiosity was aroused at once. "Yes, I remember. Came from your part, didn't she? I wasn't looking after her, you know, but I helped her to dress one night, when her chambermaid was off duty. Nice girl, too, I thought her. Not much go about her, p'r'aps, but a nice girl for all that. Good eyes, but I like a bit fuller figure myself. What about her?"

Charlie hesitated. What about her? This wasn't easy to answer. "Well—you see—I've been away—up North—and I'll be going for good soon, and I wondered how she was getting on, and I met the chap from the newspaper this morning and he said he didn't know what had happened to her, you see—and she's left here, of course—I know that—but I was wondering if you knew anything about her." He looked at her hopefully.

She shook her head. "I don't. I'm sorry. Didn't she go on the films?"

He explained what he knew about that.

"Well then," said the chambermaid, "best thing you can do is to go to this London and Imperial Film Company and ask about her there. They'll have her address if nothing else. That's what I'd do. What do you want to see her for?"

"I thought—well—I'd just like to know how she was getting on. You see, with both of us being here at the same time, and going to the theatre together one night and then at the B.B.C. that other time—

we were a bit friendly then, like—and—”

“In other words,” said the chambermaid severely, “you’re struck on her. Now don’t get silly. Why shouldn’t you be struck on her. You’re as good as she is.”

“I’m not,” he protested indignantly.

“Course you are. I’ve talked to both of you, haven’t I? And I say you’re as good as she is.”

“No, I’m not. Why, she got this prize—and she’ll be going on the films and meeting rich chaps and all that. She wouldn’t look twice at me.”

“All right. What are you bothering about her for then?” she demanded cruelly. Then she laughed. “I wish you could see your face. Of course you’re struck on her. I’ll bet you’ve been thinking about her all the time you’ve been away. Haven’t you now?”

“If you want to know,” Charlie mumbled, “I have.”

“Now listen to me,” she continued. “You’re a decent young chap, and you’ve some sense in your head, else you’d have been spoilt by all that silly nonsense about you in the paper. I’m not saying a word against the girl. She was a nice little thing, but you’re as good as she is, any day in the week. Trust me to know. And if you ask me, you’ve got your head screwed on better than she has. If she won’t look twice at you, then the more fool her. And let me tell you another thing. I used to think I was a cut above a policeman. Oh—yes—no bobbies for me. Wouldn’t have looked at one. But now I’m going to marry one—and it can’t happen too soon for me.”

“That’s different,” said Charlie, who felt that the

gulf between him and Ida Chatwick was much greater than any that could separate chambermaids and policemen. "But I would like to see her for a minute and know how she's getting on, before I go for good."

"Well, you go to that film company, and if they don't know anything, you come and see me again. I'll ask my chap about it then, because it's surprising what policemen in London get to know. They're on to everything, they are, and mine doesn't miss anything, I can tell you."

He felt he had a friend here and so did not hesitate to tell her what had been happening to him, even down to his daily skirmishes with the terrifying Mrs. Barragada. They had a cosy ten minutes' gossip about themselves among the half-dusted furnishings of the Antoinette suite. When he was leaving, he promised to let her know how he went on, no matter whether he found Miss Chatwick at the film company's place or not. He felt more cheerful than he had done for the last few days. There was something refreshing and inspiring about this red-haired chambermaid. If her young man wasn't arresting people day and night, it could only be because there was a shortage of criminals on his beat.

There had seemed nothing difficult about going out to a film studio and asking what had become of Ida Chatwick. Actually, however, it was a very long and dreary business. To begin with, the studio at Acton took some finding. He did not know where Acton was, and when he got to Acton the studio itself had still to be found. It was nearly six o'clock

when he finally arrived at the Enquiries office, to face more sergeant-majors. And the place was like a railway station on a bank holiday. It was ten minutes before Charlie was noticed at all.

"What department?" the man shouted.

Charlie did not know what department he wanted. He began some confused explanation of his visit, but the man had to turn away to attend to somebody else.

So at last he tried the other man, who was older and fatter, and not quite so busy. But this fellow, too, wanted to know what department. Here, it seemed, they could only think in departments. In despair, he admitted that he would like somebody's address.

"You want the Casting," said the man, "that's what you want. But I doubt if you'll get 'em now. Fill this in and I'll see what I can do. Then go and wait in there."

He found himself then in a large waiting-room, which was filled with cigarette smoke and the smell of damp plaster. There were between twenty and thirty people there, some of them—who looked like actors—laughing and talking together, and the others staring down at their boots in a rather hopeless fashion. During the first ten minutes or so, boys in uniform came and led out a few lucky ones, but after that even the boys stopped coming in and nothing happened. Finally, Charlie, sick of this place, went out and returned to the Enquiries, only to find there an entirely new sergeant-major, who appeared to be very irritable. The other two had gone.

"Casting Department's closed for to-day," this man threw at him.

"Here, but I've been waiting—"

"Can't help that. It's closed for to-day. Napoo."

"I'll have to come in the morning then," said Charlie.

"That's up to you."

So that long journey was wasted. But he was there in the morning, before ten, only to find the place more crowded and confusing than ever. This time he was not so meek, and when at last he was given a form to fill in, he decided to call himself Miss Chatwick's brother and to hang about and make a nuisance of himself until something happened. This method worked, and at last he was taken upstairs into the presence of a middle-aged woman who wore yellow tortoise-shell spectacles.

"This is the Miss Chatwick who was given a test here after she'd won a prize offered by the *Morning Pictorial*?"

"That's her," cried Charlie eagerly. He was getting on at last.

"Well, we can't give you her address, because we haven't got it. We gave her the test, as we promised, but it was a failure. She'd had no previous experience, didn't photograph well, her voice wasn't good for sound, and she wasn't a type we wanted. So we didn't need her address. Quite useless. Sorry."

Charlie found himself wandering down the street outside before he had completely recovered from his surprise. He was angry with these film people, who kept you waiting about for hours and then didn't know a promising star when they saw one.

Quite useless! What did that woman with the yellow spectacles know about it? If she'd any sense, she wouldn't be wearing such spectacles. He would never go and see another London and Imperial film again as long as he lived. Didn't photograph well! Not the type they wanted! No, he knew the sort they wanted—awful little bits. He argued bitterly about them all the way back on the bus. For the time being he forgot about himself entirely.

When he did begin to consider his own situation, he was miserably bewildered. He was determined now to learn what had happened to Ida, and, if possible, to see her just once before he went away. She might have gone back to Pondersley, of course, but, remembering what she had said about going back there, Charlie felt sure that she was still somewhere in London. But where?—that was the point. In a town of a sensible size you had a good chance of meeting somebody you were looking for, but here in London you might search the streets for ten years and never run across the one person you wanted. Millions of faces, and never the right one. All you had here, to catch hold of a person with, was a bit of an address, a figure and a street on a scrap of paper; let go of that and the person disappeared into the crowd, vanished among miles and miles of chimney pots, like somebody falling into the Atlantic Ocean. It was a nightmare. No place ought to be as big as all that. She could be stretched out unconscious and nameless in a hospital, imprisoned in some cellar, or lying dead, for all he knew. She could be, though he did not seriously imagine for a moment that she was. She was prob-

ably having a grand time somewhere. But where?

He put the problem again to his friend, the red-haired chambermaid, later that day, when he contrived a meeting with her for a few minutes outside the staff entrance to the hotel.

"I'll have to think about this a bit," she told him. "But don't you worry. If she's here, we'll find her. You can stay a few days longer, can't you?"

"I'd do that anyhow," he replied. "Must wait to see what happens to this chap I know—Kibworth. Then again, I haven't a job to go back to yet. No, I'll be here till well into next week, whatever happens."

"She might have gone back home, y'know."

"She might, but I'll bet anything she hasn't. Not after what she said to me. She's too proud to go back there, with her tail between her legs. That's what some of 'em up there's just waiting for. Always are."

"You needn't tell me that," cried the chambermaid. "I've known that sort all my life. I thought from the start that girl would be best off at home—I fancy I told her so—but I can understand her not wanting to crawl back while a lot o' grinning, half-dead apes say, 'What did I tell you?' I'd be the same myself. I'd stick it here. You might have to go round to all the other film studios."

"My God, I hope not," cried Charlie. "Let's think o' something better than that. Just that one film studio was enough for me."

"Well, leave it to me a day or two. I'll think about it, and I'll talk it over with my chap. The police is used to this sort of thing. They're always having to find people. Where is it you're staying?"

He gave her the address of Boomerang House.

"Well, I may write to you there," she continued. "And listen. You think about yourself for a day or two. Try for a job or something. And don't take it all too hard. You're beginning to look down in the mouth. You've got some money in your pocket, haven't you? All right then, try to enjoy yourself a bit. And take it easy."

## 2

Charlie tried to follow the excellent advice of his friend, the chambermaid, but did not succeed in taking things easily. Too much was happening, and he could not help worrying. He paid another visit to Brixton to see Kibworth, who grinned sardonically when Charlie explained what had occurred when he tried to persuade the *Daily Tribune* to take up Kibworth's case. "And I'll tell you another thing," said Kibworth, "if I hadn't known from the start you couldn't possibly succeed, chum, I wouldn't have let you have a pop at it at all. What would I have looked like, being boosted in the *Tribune*? Matter of fact it would have been a very clever move on their part, if they wanted to discredit me with the party. But the Boss Press is too stupid even to play its own game properly."

Charlie could not help thinking that there was about Kibworth now an air of self-importance that he hadn't noticed before. Was that the result of being in prison a few days?

"We'll have you with us yet, comrade," Kibworth

continued. "And don't bother about me. I'll get a couple of months and it won't do me any harm. I'll be able to think—and plan."

"He's beginning to talk as if he's Lenin," Charlie said to himself. To Kibworth he observed: "I don't know about joining you lot. But when I can settle down a bit, I'm going to try and think all this business out. Is it fixed you come up next Monday?"

"Monday morning at Norfolk Street."

"I'll be there," said Charlie. "Good luck."

On Friday night he returned to Boomerang House to find two letters waiting for him, both of them replies to letters he had written. The first was cheering, for in it Aunt Nellie said that she was having a wonderful time at Frentlands, where you had a blue eiderdown on your bed and the wireless just above it and a view of the sea straight out of the window, and one of the nurses was engaged to a young man in Africa. The other reply was depressing. It was from Oglesby, the A.C.P. works manager at Utterton. Charlie had written to him, asking to have his old job back. Oglesby's reply was that as Charlie had been first taken on at the company's headquarters and only transferred to the Utterton works, he was forwarding Charlie's application to headquarters; but that at the same time he was taking care to inform the company that Charlie's place had been filled and that he, Oglesby, had not the least desire to set eyes on him again. A brutal postscript suggested that Charlie should apply to his friends of the *Daily Tribune* for a job. This gave the game away, Charlie considered. Oglesby was paying him out now for that little scene that night,

when Kinney got so angry and Oglesby had been compelled to give in. It looked now as if he'd completely finished with the A.C.P. No job. He'd have to try elsewhere. Perhaps his bit of money might come in handy, not to keep himself with, but to start him in some little business of his own. But what little business? They weren't doing so well these days, either, the little businesses. No, nothing doing. It was then he remembered that queer little Sir Edward Catterbird, whose address in the City he had somewhere. Sir Edward had said that night he might be able to find him something to do.

The next morning was Saturday and Charlie knew that important business men didn't always go to their offices on Saturday morning; but he was so anxious to find something, so eager to be up and doing, so tired of merely waiting for things to happen, that he set out for the City. Sir Edward's establishment there was dark and solemn. When Charlie rang a bell at a counter labelled *Enquiries*, it was answered by a lad of seventeen or so, with an open mouth and too many freckles.

"I'd like to see Sir Edward Catterbird, please."

The lad leaned forward. "Potty," he whispered.

"What's that?" Charlie was startled.

"Batty," the lad whispered, with immense relish.  
"Loco."

"What are you talking about?"

"What's this?" A whiskery dried-up man came out now and brushed aside the lad.

"I'd like to see Sir Edward Catterbird, please," Charlie repeated.

"Is it a personal matter?"

"Yes, it is. He told me to come and see him down here."

"Ah—I see. I'm sorry to say that Sir Edward's not here. He's—er—suffering from a severe nervous breakdown. He's been away for a week and we're afraid it may be months—many months—before he's himself again."

So that was what the lad meant by his "batty." Poor little Sir Edward had been taken away, wrong in his head. Remembering how queerly Sir Edward had talked that night, Charlie supposed that he ought not to be surprised, but actually he was surprised and shocked. It was not that another possible job had vanished. It was the thought of the little man himself that disturbed him. Mad. Or going mad. Probably there were thousands and thousands in this city, people passing him in the street now, who were either mad or rapidly going mad. He began to look with a new and shuddering interest at all those strange eyes.

He made a discovery now that many newcomers to London had made before him, that if your mid-week has not been very pleasant in London, your week-end will be still less pleasant. There was nothing in his situation to cheer him. No job waiting for him at the A.C.P.; no job from Sir Edward, now batty; his business with the *Daily Tribune* a failure; and no news of Ida Chatwick. This young woman, as he freely confessed to himself, was no concern of his, but the thought of her worried him now more than all the other matters put together. The outlook was bleak, and a week-end spent at Boomerang House in a friendless London did

nothing to make it seem rosier. On Sunday, fleeing from Mrs. Barragada and the manageress and those dim smelly stairs, Charlie walked about until his feet ached. You may have seen him that day, a dusty, worried young man, limping past.

## 3

Monday was different. It looked and tasted better. And there was a letter from the chamber-maid, who said that after talking to several people who knew a bit about these things, she thought the best thing Charlie could do was to try the agents who engaged people for the films. The girl might easily have gone to them and left her address. The chambermaid ended by giving him the name and address of the biggest of these film agents. And she was his truly, Eva Kenmore. Charlie promptly called down all manner of blessings upon the vivid head of his friend Eva Kenmore. This looked promising. He would go to this film agent's place this very morning. But no, he would have to wait until the afternoon. Kibworth was appearing at the police court this morning.

Charlie went on to the police court in good time and managed to squeeze in at the back. First, he heard three cases of street betting, about which the detectives, the solicitors, and the magistrates talked as if it were akin to murder. To hear them you would have thought that no decent member of society had betted money on a horse for generations. Ridiculous, Charlie thought it. Then there were a

lot of drunk cases, who popped in and out with extraordinary rapidity, to the tune of five shillings or seven and six.

Kibworth's was the first important case. He looked quite pleased with himself, as Charlie had thought he would. He did not see Charlie, but he smiled at a woman just near. Perhaps this was the woman whose name and address he had given Charlie, who promptly took note of her. At Utterton, Kibworth had talked—and more than talked, had behaved—as if Scotland Yard men had been on his track then, but nothing was said about this in court, as Charlie noticed with some surprise. No, it was simply that Kibworth's conduct, on a certain recent date, had been such as was likely to lead to a breach of the peace, which seemed to Charlie a fairly convenient sort of charge for everybody concerned, except the prisoner. The fellow-communist who had undertaken to defend Kibworth was a young legal gentleman with an unreal beard and a squeaky voice, to both of which the magistrate appeared to take an instant dislike. The accused, it seemed, had been taken up twice before on the same charge. Asked if he had anything to say, Kibworth said that he had, and embarked at once, quite jauntily, on what looked like being a very long statement; but he was immediately cut short by the magistrate, who appeared to be under the impression now that Kibworth should have nothing to say. The beard squeaked in vain. "I find you guilty of the charge," said the magistrate solemnly. He was a very old man, this magistrate, and he did not seem to like sitting in the Norfolk Street Police

Court, did not like his chair, the clerk, the solicitors, the detectives, and especially the accused persons; and so persisted in misunderstanding things that everybody else seemed to understand quite easily; and was very much the cross old gentleman who had been dragged out of his bed and then kept from his club by a lot of stupid nincompoops and insolent law-breakers.

"I find you guilty of the charge," he said solemnly, but with dawning cheerfulness, "and shall proceed to punish you. You are not being punished, you must understand, because you hold and express in public certain political opinions. This is a free country and a man is at liberty to hold what opinions he pleases—"

"Ses you!" a voice from somewhere behind Charlie exclaimed softly.

"But because, after being warned and convicted before, you persist in indulging in conduct which in the view—and the proper view—of the police is likely to lead to a breach of the peace. I sentence you to two months' imprisonment."

Charlie distinctly heard the woman near him draw a sharp breath. Kibworth gave her a nod and another smile as he went out. She herself struggled out and made for the other door and Charlie promptly followed her. He caught up with her just outside the court.

"Aren't you Mrs. Brooksten?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, blinking away some tears. She had dark eyes and prominent cheek-bones, and looked like a foreigner, though she did not talk like one. "What do you want?"

Charlie explained who he was. Yes, Kibworth had told her about him. Finding that this stranger was a friend of sorts, she began blinking harder than ever.

"Now listen," said Charlie sympathetically. "It's bad luck, but he only got what he expected, and I don't think he minds much. Two months is nothing. Gone in no time at all. Let's go and have a cup of tea, and then we can talk properly."

So, over a cup of tea, under the curious gaze of waitresses who had at once come to the conclusion that they were a couple who had just had a quarrel, they arranged their little financial transaction. Part of that money from the *Daily Tribune*, that money which Shuckleworth had handed over to him so grandly for the benefit of the news film, was now being diverted to the mistress of a communist prisoner in Pentonville. When Charlie thought of that, he suddenly laughed.

"Why do you laugh?" asked Mrs. Brooksten, no longer tearful.

"Not at you, so don't worry," he told her. "And I couldn't begin to tell you. It's too much of a mix-up."

## 4

Now at last for news of Ida Chatwick. Charlie climbed the stairs to the film agency. "Hello!" he said to himself, "this is another waiting job." The waiting-room was filled with people waiting; the landing was half filled; and they were beginning to wait at the top of the stairs.

"This film business," he confided to a tall, elderly man, "seems to be all waiting."

"May I ask if you're in the business yourself?" said the man.

Charlie admitted that he wasn't.

"I thought not, I thought not," the other went on, in a deep solemn tone. "Otherwise you wouldn't have said it *seems* to be all waiting. It definitely and indubitably *is* all waiting. You wait—here or elsewhere—to be taken on, and you wait and wait. At last you get work. You go to the studio. You wait and wait to play, wait and wait *and* wait. After that, you wait to be told to go, and then begin waiting for another job. The only thing you don't have to wait for—and here the film beats the theatre—is your money. Otherwise, it's a perfect sort of life for an Oriental philosopher. If the climate were better, I'd turn *yogi* and contemplate my navel."

"But are there always so many people waiting?"

"No, we've a few more than usual this afternoon. There's a rumour of a big call for crowd work at Shepherd's Bush. But this is nothing. I've seen them all down the stairs and a hundred yards down the street outside. But I think you said you weren't in the business?"

"No, I'm not. I only want to see if they've got the address of a friend of mine."

"My dear fellow, you mustn't wait here then. You'd be here all day. Go straight into that office there and ask the girl if she's got the address. If you wait your turn in this queue, your friend may die of extreme old age before you get the address.

Yes, through that door. Not at all. The pleasure is mine."

At first the girl inside, who looked as if she was tired of remembering that people were waiting all round her, wouldn't let him speak. "You'll have to wait your turn."

"But listen—"

"That's the rule. Nobody's seen—except by appointment—unless they wait their turn."

"I don't want to be seen," Charlie protested.

"I can't even take your name," she snapped.

"I don't want you to take my name. Will you just listen to me a minute. I've not come here for a job. I'm not a film actor. Wouldn't have it as a gift."

"Oh—that's different," said the girl, cheering up, as if pleased to meet another human being and not simply another film actor. "What is it you want then?"

"I was sent here," Charlie began, thinking that it sounded more important and official, "to enquire about a young lady called Ida Chatwick, whose address we can't find. We think she might have been here and left you her address."

The girl took down a large book, consulted it and then from somewhere mysterious produced a small photograph of Ida. "Is that her?"

"Yes," said Charlie, his heart thumping away as if something exciting had just happened. The photograph had done it. He would never have believed himself capable of such silliness.

"Know her all right," the girl grumbled. "She worried the life out of me last week. Couldn't keep

her off the doorstep. Isn't she the one who got a beauty prize? Fat lot of good it's done her, I must say."

"Do you know where she's living?" asked Charlie eagerly.

"She's had two addresses already," said the girl, as if everything connected with poor Ida was the subject of a grievance. "Doesn't seem to know her own mind about where she's going to live. Well, the second one is care of Mrs. Malligan, 25, Stanleydale Road, S.W. 1."

"Let me write that out," cried Charlie. And then: "Where is that, do you know?"

"Somewhere behind Victoria Station. I lived down that way once. Never again."

"You don't know if she's doing any film work?"

"I don't, but I could give a pretty good guess. And if you see her, tell her to give us a rest, will you?"

"I'll tell her that all right," replied Charlie, as he moved off. Outside there seemed to be still more people waiting now, and it took him some time to get out. Though nearly all these people were very neatly dressed, some of them had that look about the eyes he had noticed in Slakeby: they might wear their hats on one side and carefully flick minute specks of dust off their creased trousers, but that look about the eyes announced that they were drifting towards starvation point. What a life—waiting, waiting, all smartly dressed, with that constant gnawing inside you!

It was quite late in the afternoon when he found Stanleydale Road, a street of tall, gloomy houses.

The door of Number 25 hadn't been painted for a long time. The basement window was cracked, and through an opening in it there came the sound of an old gramophone and a smell of fried onions. The door was opened by a girl, so small and untidy that she looked like a ragamuffin child pretending to be a servant.

"Can I speak to Miss Ida Chatwick?" asked Charlie, his heart going bump-bump.

"Top floor. On the right," the infant snapped, holding the door open. "She's in."

He did not walk up those stairs; for some strange reason, he crept up them. When he reached the top landing, he had to stop, not simply because he was out of breath, but because a swelling excitement inside threatened to suffocate him. There was her door, on the right. He kept quiet, did not move, for just then he heard something. Not mere crying, but sobbing; and it came from behind that door. An odd sort of sudden sweat seemed to break out all over him. He knocked on the door, and then at once the sound of sobbing ceased. He knocked again, and now there was movement inside the room. The door was opened just a few inches. "What do you want?"

"It's me. Charlie Habble. Do you remember?"

And then he was inside the room, looking at her. He saw quite clearly how untidy and miserable she looked, her face all swollen; but she was the girl he had been thinking about all the time, the girl he was looking for. "Nay," he said gently, "don't cry." Involuntarily he opened his arms, and now, there she was, inside them, pressing her face against

his shoulder, crying like anything, while all he could do was to hold her tighter and make daft little noises at her. As he held her there the light of certain knowledge broke in upon his bewildered mind: he knew that all her great plans for herself had come to nothing; he knew that he would beg her to marry him and that he had only to persist and she would agree; he knew that she was weak and rather vain and would always be quickly dissatisfied, and was not at all the solid sensible girl that would make a good wife for a man like himself; he knew it all, and did not care: he was content with her there, heavy on his heart. The way they would take now together might not lead to easy content, might bring trouble down on them like rain; but it was his road and hers, and they had to take it or refuse to live. In this moment, he was not the blind happy lover, but a wise man, one for whom, for a tick or two of time, there is a pattern in the shifting muddle.

"I've thought about you such a lot. . . ."

"I've thought about you all the time. . . ."

"I wondered where you'd got to. . . ."

"I've been looking for you for days and days, just to see you once before I went. . . ."

"But do you really. . . ?"

"All the time I have, only I never thought. . . ."

"I can't believe it, can you?"

"Think I can't! Are you sure. . . ."

"You're—well—you're you—that's it."

"Is it? Tell me again. I haven't been me—not since I saw you last. . . ."

A lot of that, of course. At first the emotions

drowned the words. Their hands, for ever coming together and then gripping hard, were more eloquent. They might have been—as indeed they felt they were—the only two real flesh-and-blood beings in a huge city of ghosts.

But after a cup of tea, how they talked then! Explaining themselves, reassuring one another, comparing this moment of his with that moment of hers, they talked the last glimmer of daylight out of the decaying chasm of Stanleydale Road; talked the fierce lights of commerce into the lower half of the sky and the mild non-commercial stars into the upper half, at which they stared together between Mrs. Malligan's dirty lace curtains; while Mrs. Malligan herself, over a bottle of stout in the basement, made up her mind to double the rent of the top floor right because the young lady up there had evidently decided to go in for the old game. Both lovers had a battle to describe, but it was Ida who could show the deeper wounds.

"I'll tell you now, Charlie," she began. "I couldn't before, when I didn't know how you felt about me. I was crying because I didn't know what to do. I'd thought of killing myself—turning the gas on or something. You can say it's all been so quick, I can't have had a bad time, but I have, Charlie—it's been awful. I didn't know what to do, I didn't know what to do. You see, Charlie, I expected such a lot when I got that prize. You can't blame me, can you? Anybody would, wouldn't they?—after all that fuss. And I was no good for pictures—they told me so. I cried a lot then. But I tried other places, and it was no good. I went from one place to another

until I could have dropped. Nobody offered me a decent job of any sort. I never met anybody all the time who was really friendly. The decent men told me straight out I wasn't any good and told me to go back home. The other sort—and there's plenty of them about—just wanted what they could get, and I could see they didn't even want that in a really friendly way. You see what I mean, Charlie? They didn't care about *me*—not one of them. You could tell that by the way they looked. I seem to have had hundreds looking like that at me—and it got worse and worse. And I was a little fool about that money they gave me as part of the prize. I was sure I was going to be all right, and I spent a lot of it, nearly all of it on clothes and things, and it just went. And I couldn't go home, Charlie. I just couldn't. Perhaps I would have done, I don't know—perhaps I would, instead of killing myself—because when it comes to the point, I know I'm an awful coward. But I *couldn't*. I'd been so grand with them all after I'd got the prize and thought everything was going to be wonderful, and they'd have never let me forget it, never. If I'd just come to London as an ordinary girl looking for a job, I bet I could have stuck it all right, but I didn't, you see, Charlie. They brought me up here and made such a fuss about me, as if I was somebody wonderful, and then it all just went. And nobody cared at all—that was the really awful thing—nobody cared. Do you see what I mean, Charlie?"

"Yes, I see what you mean," said Charlie slowly. "It's the let-down that did it."

"You see, it's like you going to a party or some-

thing and thinking everybody there so nice and friendly and all of them making such a fuss of you, and then suddenly it isn't a party at all and they're all strangers and nobody cares about you. Oh—Charlie!" And she clung to him.

"And don't forget," he told her, "that I've come a bigger cropper than you."

"Charlie, don't say that—'cropper.' That's what they always say in Pondersley. I could hear them saying, 'Oh—she's come a cropper'—and that's why I was afraid to go home."

"All right then, Ida. No croppers. But what I'm trying to say is that I'm only an ordinary working chap who hasn't even got a job at all just now. That hero business is all done with. Don't forget that."

"I don't care, Charlie. Besides you're not an ordinary working chap at all—you've got a lot more about you. And now," she added proudly, confidently, "you're going to have a lot more still. Aren't you?"

"Am I?" But he felt himself growing a bit already. He realised, perhaps obscurely, that Ida might be weak on her own and yet strong when attached to him.

They crept closer, mumbled a little, and then were quiet. London, no concern of theirs now, went roaring by, as if over some Niagara. It did not matter any more; they had done with it, and were their own real selves again, only of course bigger and wiser than those two gaping fools who had been brought in triumph from the Midlands.

It did not take them long after that to discover that they were both very hungry. Nearly eleven

o'clock, but that didn't matter: they went off arm-in-arm, the metropolis their kitchen.

## 5

Five o'clock the following afternoon found them in an Oxford Street tea-shop together, easily the nicest-looking couple in the place. Indeed, Ida attracted a good deal of attention, as well she might, for nobody as pretty and pleased with life had been seen in that tea-shop for days. Charlie was busy explaining the letter he had received that morning from Mr. Merson, one of the directors of his old firm, the A.C.P.

"You see, Ida, I wrote to Oglesby, who's manager at the Utterton place, asking for my job back, and he said he'd have to send the letter on to the head office, but at the same time he was going to tell 'em he didn't want me back at any price. That was because he got huffy that night because Mr. Kinney told him to go to hell. After that, he'd done with me. I thought that had finished me with A.C.P. But this Mr. Merson—he was there that night too, and now I come to think of it, it was him that interfered when Oglesby was losing his temper with Mr. Kinney—says now that if I go and see him at their Bendworth place, he thinks he can find me a job."

"Isn't that nice of him?" cried the girl, who was anxious now to discover that the world was really filled with nice people.

A month ago, Charlie would have agreed, but now he had a few ideas of his own. "I know why

he's doing it. He's frightened of the A.C.P. Company getting a bad name with the papers. He was that night. And I'll bet he still thinks that if they didn't take me back, I could make a row in the papers. I couldn't, but I'm not going to tell him. Let him go on thinking so, I say."

"Would you mind going back to Bendworth?" asked Ida, who had instantly furnished a little house there on what was left of Charlie's money.

"No, I like Bendworth. It's my own town. I never cared for Utterton."

"I like it too, anyhow just for a start," said Ida. "You know—I think I told you—I used to stay there with my uncle. Let's go, shall we?"

"We'll go to-morrow. I shall tell him it'll have to be a good job, too," Charlie boasted, now the grand conquering male.

"Then I'll slip over to Pondersley," Ida continued, planning like mad. "And you'll have to come too, Charlie, just to show them that I really am engaged. And listen, Charlie, you're not to tell them you weren't a hero at all, because you were—really—and—oh well—you'll see when you get there."

But he was staring now at a large red-faced man who had just entered. "I know that chap," he remarked finally.

The man, who had a tremendous nose and the masterful air that frequently goes with such a nose, stood in the centre and looked about him. Then he caught sight of Charlie, returned his stare, frowned for a moment, and at last, deciding that here was someone he knew, majestically descended upon them.

"Know you, don't I?" he boomed, sitting down at their table.

"I thought it was you," said Charlie, rather shyly.

"Otley, Finnigan Otley's my name."

"Yes, I know. My name's Habble, and I met you one afternoon at Utterton. Do you remember?"

"Of course I remember. Utterton, that's it. Wasn't there another fellow? Seem to remember another fellow."

"Yes, a chap called Kibworth, a communist. He's doing two months in Pentonville."

"Is he? Not surprised. Said they were after him then. Red hot, he was. But not a bad chap, the sort we could use if we weren't all wrong in our heads. Here, waitress. A pot of China tea, please, and two pieces of toast—and when I say *toast* I mean *toast*, and not bread that's been thrown into the fire and then raked out again." Then Mr. Otley turned to Charlie and smiled at Ida. "What are you doing here?" Mr. Otley demanded again. "Left your job in Utterton?"

Charlie stared at him. "Why, haven't you heard about me, Mr. Otley?"

"Heard about you! Of course I haven't heard about you. Why should I hear about you? What have you been doing?"

"I expect you've been away, haven't you?"

"What d'you mean—away? Haven't been out of England, if that's what you mean. Been on the move nearly all the time, of course—have to be. But what's all this?"

It was Ida's turn now. She smiled and blushed very prettily and then said: "And haven't you heard

about me either, Mr. Otley?"

"My dear young lady," he bellowed, so that all the tea-shop could hear him, "I'm delighted to make your acquaintance, charmed to be sitting at the same table. But I've not heard about you. Why should I?"

"Don't you read the papers?" asked Charlie.

"Read the papers? Of course I read the papers. Keep myself well informed, have to keep myself well informed. Read two or three newspapers every day of my life. But what's that got to do with it? Been killing somebody? I never read about trials, only read the technical law cases. Patent law's what I keep my eye on. And a damned ramp it is too. What with that at one end and a lot of people at the other who've got the commercial ethics of pariah dogs, a man like me can't even sleep with both eyes shut. I think I remember showing you a little model of one of my new devices for conserving power. Well, I've had an experience with that since I saw you that gives you a good idea of the state of commercial morality in this country. I met a man in Liverpool—hello, what's this? Toast? Never. Look at it. Not touched on one side, burnt black on the other side. Take it away, girl, take it away. That's right. Well, I met a man in Liverpool—"

But why should we, who are not under the immediate domination of Mr. Otley's nose, stay to listen? Let's leave them. Good luck. Good-bye.



